

Author's Note: For those of you who read Harry Potter and the Final Straw, the first three chapters of this story will seem quite familiar. I originally meant Straw to be a Harry Goes to America story, but as I explained part way through Straw, I changed my mind, and that led to the direction that I went with the fic. Now, while I search for a good approach to do a seventh year story, I'm revisiting what I was going to do a year ago, and that's to send Harry abroad. I think I altered enough of the first nine chapters (compressed here into the first three chapters) to make it worth it to re-read them, and then the action gets much different in Chapters Four and beyond. I repeat what you read in the summary, this story is AU from the get-go, and please read and review it (if you review) as such. Well enough from me, enjoy the show.

The ride home from Kings Cross Station had been a silent one, Vernon and Petunia weren't even speaking with each other. The threat of Moody and Arthur Weasley had actually penetrated even Vernon Dursley's stubborn mind and he had quickly come to decide that harassing Harry simply wasn't worth the trouble it would get him into, so he said nothing to Harry on the ride back to Little Whinging. Petunia Dursley was lost in her own thoughts as well, having seen the haunted look on Harry's face, she knew something bad must have happened. So each in their own way (Dudley was not along for the trip) decided to make the best of the situation and not invite more trouble upon themselves by abusing Harry.

Once home, Harry grabbed his trunk and headed inside, though he was slightly taken aback when Vernon, with a blank look on his face, held the front door open so he could get the trunk through. After Hedwig was brought inside, Harry, not paying attention to Vernon's looking around the yard (for freaks, one can surmise), would not leave the house again for over three weeks.

Harry sat in his bedroom at Number 4 Privet Drive and thought, something he had been doing quite a bit of in the two weeks since the Department of Mysteries and the death of Sirius Black. It had occurred to Harry on that drive home how little thought he'd actually given to his future. When he had done his career counseling session with Professor McGonagall he had pretty much plucked the idea of being an Auror out of thin air, thinking it would be a cool job to have,

but he hadn't really considered it beforehand. Then there was the Prophecy to consider, Harry wasn't sure that he believed it, though he acknowledged Dumbledore's apparent faith in it. Harry found it difficult to believe anything Trelawney said as gospel, particularly something like this, three years of her teaching had often left him doubting whether she was really a witch or simply a squib with a decent imagination. That said, it explained a lot of Dumbledore's behavior over the years, such as placing Harry with the Dursleys.....though that did not make him feel any better.

Dear (insert name here),

I'm writing to ask that no one send me any letters for a couple of weeks, nor do I want any visitors. I need some time to sort things out about what's been happening, and I need time to grieve for Sirius as well. I know that there are people watching the Dursley house and I have no interest in doing anything remotely foolish, I just need some time to myself. I appreciate your understanding this.

Yours,

Harry

Upon arriving at his "home" Harry had written this form letter to most of his friends, in the somewhat in vain hope of having some time where he didn't have to think about their views on his many issues. Harry didn't actually expect most of them to respect his wishes, and he was right, letters had come full bore starting the next day. Typical of them was Hermione's letter:

Dear Harry,

How are you? I know you must be hurting about Sirius, but you need to find a way to move on and live your life, that's what Sirius would want, and you know that. I hope you're practicing your Occlumency, you don't want anything like that to happen again, be sure to tell Dumbledore if your scar starts hurting again. If something happens please tell me, you know I want to help you.

With love,

Hermione

Not for the first time Harry wondered if Hermione was informing on him to Dumbledore, and for how long. Hermione was one of his best friends, and truth be told she had probably been a better friend to him over the years than Ron had, but her devotion to authority bordered on the frightening. Somehow the old man always seemed to know what he was up to, so Dumbledore either had some good surveillance charms working in Gryffindor tower, or he had someone on the inside. Of course he didn't want to believe that Hermione was going behind his back, and he really had no proof either way.....but the feeling wouldn't go away.

Harry's feelings about Dumbledore had gradually shifted over the weeks as well. Dumbledore had amazingly enough respected Harry's request for quiet, though he knew it wouldn't last (The old man and Neville were the only ones who were doing so, Neville had sent a two line note acknowledging Harry's letter and letting him know he was there for him when Harry needed him). The problem was, the more Harry took stock of his life, both at Privet Drive and at Hogwarts, the more dissatisfied he grew with it. The difficulties at Privet were obvious, a lack of anything resembling affection, and oftentimes a lack of food as well. Harry wondered what kind of threat Dumbledore had over Aunt Petunia to keep taking him back summer after summer, though next summer was supposed to be his last there, since on his 17th birthday he would become of age in the wizarding world and be outside Dumbledore's authority, in the summer anyway. He had a sneaking suspicion though that the old man wouldn't let that get in his way and would find a way to confine him somehow, perhaps at Grimmaud Place. There had been a couple of times over the last two weeks that Harry had seen Aunt Petunia looking particularly pensive.....but he had resisted temptation to doing any probing.

His life at Hogwarts was what really gave Harry pause, once he really thought about it. Harry knew he hadn't made that many friends in his five years there, but after he examined it he was shocked at how few there really were. Really his circle was limited to those who had gone with him to the DOM (Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna), and though he had friendly relations with Dean and Seamus (his other

roommates), he was a bit sad to realize there was no one else. Harry knew that a lot of this was due to being "The Boy Who Lived", people either wound up star-struck like Colin Creevey, or disliked him because of it, not taking any time to get to know him. Harry also acknowledged that some of it was due to Ron and Hermione, not the 2 most popular people in Gryffindor tower. Hermione's bossiness and academic mania grated on most of their housemates (Harry could only wonder what most Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs thought of her, what the Slytherins thought didn't need much effort on his part), and Ron.....The fact was, Ron wasn't a very bright wizard and tended to be a Gryffindor version of Draco Malfoy, very judgmental about those who did not fit his own ideals. The three of them had been so close for so long, that though others might have liked Harry, they just didn't want to deal with Ron and Hermione on a regular basis.

Each summer since he had been a wizard, Harry had had Hogwarts and his memories of it to hold on to, but the more he thought about it, the less he wanted to return to Hogwarts. Harry knew that he needed to make some plans, plans that couldn't be done alone. He thought on this for another night, and then took his first step toward freedom.....and in a rather unexpected direction too.

Dear Mrs. Longbottom,

I know we've never met before ma'am, but I'm a roommate at Hogwarts of your grandson Neville. First I'd like to say that I'm sorry that Neville got involved in the Department of Mysteries incident that I led, but you should know that he fought very well and I'm proud to call him my friend and ally. I'm writing to you because I need some advice, and I know from Neville about your knowledge and integrity. I need to hire a wizarding solicitor, hopefully one who has some knowledge of muggle law as well, and I was hoping there was one you could recommend to me. I have some issues that I need to take care of and I need that kind of help. I'm asking you and not someone at Hogwarts ma'am, because to be honest I don't want to hire someone under their control or influence, so I can get impartial advice.

I would appreciate any help you could give me, please give my best to Neville

Harry Potter

"Here you go Hedwig, please see if Mrs. Longbottom will reply right away, and if so wait for it, ok girl?"

Hedwig gave a dignified hoot, as if Harry knew how to deliver mail better than she did: 'let the expert handle it' she seemed to say.

Harry wasn't sure if this was the right course of action to take, but he thought that to do what he was thinking of, he would need legal advice, advice that he couldn't trust the Order to give him, he could hear them now, "Oh let us handle that Harry." or "You don't need to worry about those things right now Harry." There was certainly no harm in asking Mrs. Longbottom, as he didn't think she was an Order member, and figured that Neville had likely spoken well of him over the years to her.

For lack of anything else to do in the meantime, Harry started in on his exercises. He was up, after two weeks, to 200 sit-ups a day, as well as 50 push-ups. Certainly not Olympic worthy, but much better than he could do when he started. Harry had been surprised at how out of shape he was, considering how skinny he still looked, even after 10 months of Hogwarts food and more than a couple of chocolate frogs. Plus, it helped kill the time, truth be told, Harry was a bit nervous about going outside the house, given what had happened last summer with the Dementors. He wasn't positive that the Order was watching Privet Drive (not that they would have told him if he'd asked), but he assumed that someone was on guard (hopefully not Dung).

After he finished with his exercises, he wandered downstairs to get a glass of water:

"Hello Aunt Petunia."

His Aunt looked at him and nodded, though not unpleasantly. Relations with her had been better than ever since he got back, though that wasn't saying too much. She and Vernon both looked like they were fighting some kind of inner battle while they ate dinner with Harry, the only extended times they were in his presence. Vernon's

battle was reconciling 15 years of verbal abuse and threats, with the certainty of 'freaks' coming into his home and doing things to him. Petunia alternately looked nervous and sad when she was around Harry, as if seeing more and more of Lily in him, and remembering her fate and why he had landed with them in the first place. Harry hadn't seen Dudley more than once or twice since he'd been back, which relieved him somewhat. Dudley had gotten a summer job at a local cinema and was rarely home, and seemed bent on avoiding Harry when he was. Harry had been fairly worried about seeing Dudley again after the Dementor incident last summer, and what he might do to Harry if he still blamed him for it. Dudley's thoughts remained his own however.

In the back of his mind, Harry knew that if he wanted some legal freedom, he would need the cooperation of Vernon and Petunia. He knew that they were his muggle guardians of course, and he was fairly certain that they were in the wizarding world as well. The only alternative to them had been Sirius, who between Azkaban and being in hiding after his escape, had never been in a position to claim guardianship. The question was, how to get this cooperation? He knew that Vernon was the key, since Petunia would follow his lead. He could, of course, bribe them, but he shuddered at the thought of Vernon learning how much money he had in Gringotts, he knew his uncle's aversion to wizards wouldn't extend to money, though the idea of Vernon actually walking into Gringotts to claim it always put a smile on Harry's face.

Physical threats were another possibility, but Harry was loathe to go that route. He wasn't worried about whether he could do it or not, in fact he rather liked the idea of hurting Vernon, in the abstract anyway. For a few years time Harry had been occasionally daydreaming about his own 17th birthday present to himself, which involved a couple of hours fun with his wand and the Dursleys. The problem was, he couldn't rely on the fact that Vernon hadn't thought of this as well, and might decide to do a pre-emptive strike. Vernon Dursley was a blustery sort of man to those who didn't know him well, but Harry knew him very well and knew that hatred might make Vernon do things that both he and Harry would regret.....if Harry was alive to regret them.

One thing was certain, he couldn't dare let Dumbledore learn that he was planning any of this. Harry's distrust of the Order wasn't simply resentment of Dumbledore, and all of the half-truths, lies, and evasions that the Headmaster had been feeding him all of these years. In a perverse way he rather admired the quite Slytherin way that Dumbledore operated (in his 3rd year he had asked McGonagall what House that Dumbledore had been in, she had replied icily that it was none of his business, so he assumed it was Slytherin).....at least he would have admired it if it had happened to someone else. Harry didn't trust Dumbledore at all with his future, given what he had done and not done. Harry still had trouble believing that the blood protection at Privet Drive was the only way to protect him, particularly from a wizard who went without a body for 13 years. Hearing the Prophecy only made his resentment of Dumbledore worse, "It would have been nice to have some warning, or perhaps even a bit of formal training." Harry knew that his only real training had been his haphazard adventures, where he more or less learned how to defend himself on his own, with the exception of Remus and his Patronus. Every time he thought about Dumbledore and his decisions, and then applied basic logic to them.....well it was a good thing he wasn't allowed to use his wand.

Snape, there was another reason to be suspicious of Dumbledore. The old man had to know how much Snape hated Harry's guts, yet he forced them together time and again. Harry hated Snape with equal venom, and he felt that Sirius would be alive if not for the grease ball's need to settle old scores. Harry had never forgiven Snape for interfering during 3rd year, giving Peter Pettigrew time to escape, denying Sirius his chance at freedom, and when he was being candid with himself, he acknowledged that it was a prime reason he hadn't been so eager to learn Occlumency.

As for the rest of the Order, Harry liked them enough as people, for the most part, but like with Hermione he was wary of their blind loyalty to Dumbledore. Harry knew that what he was thinking of doing would not go over at all with Dumbledore, and he would use the Order to stop him.

Remus in particular was another sticky point, Harry knew with Sirius gone that Remus was his last true link to his parents and their

life.....but that was the problem, Remus had never been terribly forthcoming about what his parents really were like, nor had Sirius been. It had not gone unnoticed by Harry that he had learned more about his dad from Snape's pensieve than from his dad's best friends. Harry also had come to resent Remus in part for his imprisonment on Privet Drive over the years, at the very least he could have come and checked on him every once in awhile, perhaps putting some fear into the Dursleys to get him some better treatment. But no, Harry had never so much as heard of Remus until he was 13, and that grated on him more and more. There also was the practical aspect of Remus needing Dumbledore much more than the other way 'round, that alone would have put Remus' loyalty into question.

Harry never even considered asking most of the Weasleys for help, he had seen the way Molly Weasley tried to baby her sons and try not to let them make any decisions for themselves, and while he was grateful that she considered him an unofficial 8th child, he felt certain that she would be even worse with him. Mr. Weasley was a kindly man who was much sharper than he was perhaps given credit for (since he had gotten to know Luna, Harry had very privately considered her and Mr. Weasley to be two peas in a pod), but Harry knew who ruled that household. Bill and Charlie were relative unknowns to him, though he liked them both, and Percy didn't even bear thinking about. Fred and George were possibilities, he knew that they genuinely cared about him and would look out for him if he needed it, but he didn't want them crossing their parents and getting any flack. He filed away the idea though, for later. Ginny, ironically, was the Weasley he trusted least (after Percy). Harry knew that her crush had receded somewhat over the last year, but it still made him uncomfortable to consider trusting her. If anything, she was the female equivalent of Colin Creevey, liking him for his fame without really knowing him.

Ron.....Ron was his best mate, but Harry knew that Ron would tell Hermione everything. Harry wasn't sure to this day if those two had become anything more than friends over the past year. It wouldn't surprise him if they had, though he would be disappointed if they'd kept it from him. Harry couldn't understand Ron's apparent romantic feelings for Hermione, she was attractive he supposed, in a no-nonsense way, but entirely too controlling. Harry himself wanted a

girlfriend, not a boss. As it was he had been hard pressed over the past year to keep his growing irritation with Hermione to himself. He still liked them both, and knew that they only wanted what was best for him, but given his suspicions of Hermione and what she might tell their teachers, he simply couldn't risk giving anything away to Ron.....and he knew that Ron would be unlikely to forgive him if he kept anything from him.....something Harry had trouble understanding, since he himself had been nothing but loyal to Ron, a fact which the redhead could not reciprocate.

Not that he had anything to give away at this point yet, the plan was still only a vague one in his mind about getting some more freedom. Harry knew what the concept of legal emancipation was, and surmised that without Dumbledore's coercion, the Dursleys might have suggested it themselves this year, when he turned 16. He knew that Petunia knew more about the magical world than she had ever let on to him, and probably to Vernon and Dudley as well, this might have been one of those details.

Luna Lovegood was the one person he actually had corresponded with, he had specifically not included her in his 'leave me alone' letters at the beginning of the summer. They didn't talk about the DOM, but had just taken some time to get to know each other through letters, as in school they were in different years and different Houses (Harry had never had a class with any Ravenclaw in his own year). Harry wasn't quite ready to fill her in on his plans, but he always smiled when he read her letters.....which were more like streams of consciousness than anything structured, but he enjoyed them as a nice diversion from his troubles. Nothing romantic had been discussed though, and Harry had a hard time thinking of her that way.....and she had mentioned that she and Neville were writing to each other as well, though in one of her more lucid passages she assured Harry that she hadn't told anyone they were writing.

When Harry wrote to Neville's grandmother he knew that to a point he was having to trust Neville a bit, but wasn't too worried. Neville had always kind of been the odd one out in their year, with Ron and Harry teaming up, and Seamus and Dean being close. Harry knew that Neville's confidence has risen as a result of their DA work, as well as what happened in the DOM. When Harry analyzed the events in his

mind, in muggle video fashion, he was surprised to learn that Neville had put up the best fight after himself. Harry knew that he was responsible for a lot of Neville's new found abilities and felt assured that Neville would be grateful enough not to rat him out.

So who to trust? Harry trusted his friends, and most of the Order to a point.....but there was trust and there was trust, and Harry was beginning to learn the difference, a bit late for comfort perhaps.....but he decided to celebrate the fact that he made it to the party at all, rather than be considered with his tardiness.

Wednesday, July 18th, 1996

Dear Dobby,

I was wondering if you would want to work for me? I don't need a lot of looking after, but I could use certain of your skills in my life right now. I realize that you probably like working at Hogwarts with all those people, and you might not want to move, but I hope you will think about this. As for money, I'll double what you make now at Hogwarts and you can wear whatever you clothes you choose to.

If you would like to talk with me about it, just come visit Privet Drive, but please oh please just pop right into my bedroom, my aunt and uncle would probably have heart attacks if they saw you.

Thank you Dobby,

Harry Potter

This was somewhat risky, having the excitable house elf around him while in the muggle world, but Harry felt that the benefits far outweighed the risk. Harry was by no means confident of the Order being able to protect him if the Death Eaters launched a concerted raid on Privet Drive; after all they had missed two Dementors the previous summer, which is how this whole mess had started. Having watched Dobby in action against Lucious Malfoy after his 2nd year, he felt confident that at least Dobby could hold them off him while waiting for help. Harry knew that if he was forced to use his wand before he was allowed, the result might be similar to last summer, a

trial where he was by no means confident of winning, particularly without Dumbledore's willing support. Dobby being around negated that risk thankfully, all he had to do was keep him away from the Dursleys.....though now that he thought about it, Uncle Vernon might not be so volatile with Dobby available to banish him into a wall if he attacked Harry.

Hedwig had just come back with Mrs. Longbottom's answer:

Dear Mr. Potter,

That was quite a nice display of flattery in your letter, a bit too obvious maybe, but I take it in the spirit in which it was offered. First, I would like to thank you for the influence you've had on Neville, I did in fact notice the change in him since last summer, a hint of it even showed during the Winter Holidays. His father Frank (a friend of your parents I should add) was a late bloomer as well and I'm relieved to see that Neville has turned a corner.

As for your request, I found it interesting and quite practical. From what Neville has told me you grew up not even knowing of our world and probably do need some guidance in technical matters. Much of this you should have gotten in your History of Magic class, but if Binns is anything dead like he was alive, I'm sure you sleep through most of his classes.

The solicitor I use is wizard named Peter Tyson, he has an office in Diagon Alley near Quality Quidditch Supplies. He is very well versed in wizarding law; he handles all of my matters, as well as having a working knowledge of muggle law. If your intention is to gain some sort of legal emancipation (Harry's jaw dropped when he saw that she had figured it out so easily) he is the right man for the task. Get control of yourself Mr. Potter, it was very apparent what you wanted a solicitor for, particularly when you wanted someone outside of Dumbledore's sphere of influence, which Mr. Tyson is (like most solicitors he was a Ravenclaw, and is very intelligent and discreet).

I must say I am impressed that you are willing to go through proper channels to obtain your freedom Mr. Potter, and thus I am perfectly willing to keep this matter to myself. I did tell Neville what your letter

asked for, but I will not reveal to him what I told you, though he figured out your purpose on his own. Do be careful young man, I am sure that you are aware that you are the most polarizing figure in our little world here; all eyes are forever on you.

I wish you well,

Nora Longbottom

Harry took out his letter to Dobby and asked Hedwig, "You up to another trip girl? To Hogwarts this time?" Hedwig hadn't had much else to do for two weeks and gave a nod. "This goes to Dobby the house elf, he should be in the Hogwarts kitchens somewhere. You don't need to wait for a reply, he should be coming here. You remember who he is?" Hedwig rolled her eyes as she remembered all too well who Dobby was. Harry snickered and sent her on her way.

No sooner had Hedwig gotten out of the window than a large brown owl came through the window with a letter for Harry. Harry paused before opening it, listening for any reaction from downstairs if they had noticed an owl coming in during the daytime. There was no sound however, so Aunt Petunia either hadn't seen it, or chose not to say anything. Petunia's quiet around him had vaguely bothered him the last few days. Harry didn't especially want to be shouted at, but as with most people, anything that deviated from a long standing routine tended to be noticeable. The brown owl went right for Hedwig's water dish and food bowl, so it appeared as if a reply would be waited for.

There were two letters in the bundle, one from Remus Lupin, and one from Albus Dumbledore.

Harry chose to read Remus' first.

Dear Harry,

How are you doing Harry? It's been a couple of weeks since we talked and I'm sure you're still hurting over Sirius, I know I am. You didn't get him killed Harry, Sirius knew what the risks were a long time ago and he accepted that this might happen. You made him very

happy by being in his life Harry, you gave him hope at a time when he had none, and for that I know I thank you.

On another subject, Sirius left a will that must be read and gone over. You, Tonks, and I are the beneficiaries, though I don't know yet which of us got what. Sirius was the official Heir of the House of Black, his mother died before she got around to changing her will (she died in an explosion in case no one told you, she was caught in Diagon Alley during an attack while we were all students at Hogwarts, in our 7th year if I recall it correctly). The will can be read anytime we are all able to get together; it is to be done at the Trusts Department at Gringotts. Dumbledore is not happy about the idea of you leaving your relatives right now, so it might have to wait a few weeks, but we will get it done sometime between your birthday and the start of Fall term.

I would like to come visit you soon; I don't want to come unannounced for fear of making things worse with your relatives, who I hope are treating you better. I would imagine our words to them had some effect, though I should tell you that Dumbledore didn't like it that we threatened them and made it clear that we were to harm them only in an emergency. Let me know via Hedwig when I can come see you, talk to you soon.

Moony

With this letter all of Harry's concerns about Remus were validated, the man was just too close to, or afraid of, Dumbledore to be any help to him. Plus the part about the threats, and the Order not willing to act on them enraged Harry; he only prayed that Vernon wouldn't put it to the test. The paragraph about blaming himself over Sirius' death he ignored once he had read it once, Harry didn't blame himself for what happened, he blamed Dumbledore and the Death Eaters themselves. Oh sure he had worn a mental hair-shirt at first, even after the old man had told him the Prophecy, but it had subsided the more he thought about it. Harry knew he had been duped by Voldemort, and was actually a bit proud over how he and the five students who he had more or less trained fought 12 Death Eaters to a draw.

If Snape hadn't done such a half-baked job of 'teaching' him Occlumency, he might not have bitten for the fake.....let alone him actually being told why he needed Occlumency in the first place. Harry could reasonably understand why Dumbledore had been unwilling to teach him, he certainly didn't want Dumbledore's memories available for Voldemort to download either, but the old man should have kept Snape on some kind of leash. Dumbledore's forgiveness for every one of Snape's peculiarities was mystifying to Harry, he wondered if there was some kind of family connection between the two. Surely Dumbledore didn't need a spy that badly did he? Particularly one so unpopular in the wizarding community, many of whom had either suffered through Potions at his hands, or listened to younger relatives' complaints about him.

Harry braced himself for Dumbledore's note, knowing that he wouldn't like what was in it.

Dear Harry,

I hope you are having a relaxing summer holiday so far. I have not had any notes from you about pain in your scar, so if that really is the case then I am very encouraged, Voldemort must be laying low after you and your colleagues routed his forces last month. Still, I do not expect this quiet to last, and I am afraid that we must restart your Occlumency lessons again. I'm sorry to tell you that again you must have them with Professor Snape, since my reasons for not be able to do them with you are still in effect. I have spoken with Professor Snape and he has promised me that he will try to put his issues with you aside so that the lessons will succeed this time. I also must insist upon a more concentrated effort from you to learn Occlumency quickly, as I expect our enemies to be very active in the near future. Professor Snape is currently away at a conference in Canada for Potions scholars, and will be back next week; he will be coming to Privet Drive a week from this coming Friday, July 27th.

We will remove you from your relative sometime in early August, probably to Grimmaud Place, as The Burrow is too well known to hide you out there, though we have it warded to the teeth now to protect the Weasleys. Also, your OWL results are scheduled to be mailed at

the start of next week, you should have them either Monday or Tuesday, I'm confident you did well on them.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to owl me,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry had never hated Dumbledore more than after he read this letter, any hesitation he might have had about his planned course of action disappeared. Harry did not like one bit being a virtual prisoner in this house, especially this house. Far from a gilded jail cell, he felt anything would have been better than this, and now he was stuck here for another three weeks at least, he had been hoping to be sprung for his birthday. He wanted no part of Snape in this house, particularly with no other wizards around to stop his potential excesses. Harry knew that Dumbledore trusted Snape implicitly, but he did not share that trust, and knew that Snape was very capable of harming him if the spirit moved him.

Harming him wasn't the only concern, but taking him.....Harry assumed that Voldemort had some sort of price on his head, and that the Death Eater who delivered him would never need worry about his future within the Dark Side, certainly Barty Crouch Jr. had been counting on that after the Triwizard Tournament. Temptation is an awful thing for a man, especially one with no true ties to the light side, which described Snape quite well. Add that to the fact that no one in the world hated Harry more than Snape did, and Harry was fully aware of this.

Harry was glad that he had nine days to figure out how to get rid of Snape, and he hoped more than ever that he could convince Dobby to come work for him. Having a house-elf for a bodyguard might seem a bit ridiculous, but Harry wondered at the willingness of whatever outside guards the Order had watching him to interfere with Snape, who everyone in the Order knew was Dumbledore's special aide.

The brown owl hooted loudly, Harry looked up and took the hint that he should reply to his letters:

Dear Remus,

Things are fine here, there haven't been any issues with my relatives. The threats worked on Vernon apparently, and I haven't seen Dudley more than twice this whole time. I must tell you that it pissed me off to know that your threats were hollow Remus, I'm disappointed in you that you would be unwilling to stick up for me if it came to it, it explains quite a bit though. I know the Order is watching the house and I fully expect them to interfere if they hear me screaming in pain, Dumbledore or not.

I don't want to talk about Sirius right now Remus, except to tell you that I don't blame myself for his death. This is a war, and I'm all too aware that there are casualties. I miss him, and will always treasure the brief time we had with each other.

I am ready to hear Sirius' will at any point this summer, I know you need to wait for me to get out of jail, so I hope you and Tonks don't need the money too badly and can hold tight. I'm not ready to confide and confess to anyone right now Remus, so it would be best if we hold off any visit by you for the time being. If it makes any difference to you, I'm not ready to open up to anyone in my circle yet, it's not just you. I repeat, don't come inside this house without an invitation from me, unless it's an emergency.

Be good,

Harry

Harry read this over, and realized he was being a bit snotty to Remus, but he still wasn't in a good mood and decided that Remus would have to suffer a bit. Harry needed some more information before he wrote to Dumbledore, so he decided to wait on that for another day. He sent his letter off with the brown owl and went to take a shower.

When he got back, there was a very happy looking house-elf sitting on his bed, deja-vu all over again.....

Author's Note: I'm not very good at Dobby-speak, I'll try to make it a bit different style than Harry's, but bear with me.

In HP canon most adult ages aren't given, so for the sake of my story I'm going to establish the following characters' ages:

Harry and all 6th year students: 16 years old

Luna and all 5th year students: 15 years old

The Marauders, Lily, and Snape: 37 years old

Bill Weasley: 28 years old

Charlie Weasley: 26 years old

Peter Tyson: 27 years old

Molly and Arthur Weasley: 47 years old

Minerva McGonagall: A gentleman never asks

Albus Dumbledore: unknown, likely over 100 years old

Lucious Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange: 40 years old

There might be more involved later for the British parts of the story

"Hello Harry Potter!" "Dobby is so happy to see you!"

Indeed Harry had never seen the house-elf so happy, and that was saying something. Harry was relieved to note that Dobby did at least keep his voice down.

"I'm glad you came Dobby, I take it you got my letter?"

"Yes Harry Potter, I got your letter a few minutes ago, I was so happy to get a letter from the most bestest wizard ever."

“Well let’s not go that far Dobby, but I’m glad Hedwig got there ok. She’s flying back now?”

“Oh yes Harry Potter, she took a drink of water and flew off right away.”

“So what do you think about my offer Dobby? Are you interested in working for me?”

“Of course Harry Potter, all you ever had to do was ask me. You would like me to be your house-elf at Hogwarts Harry Potter?”

“Dobby, please call me Harry, not Harry Potter.....before I say anything else Dobby, I need to know that you will keep my secrets, some of the things I’m about to do will not be very popular.”

Dobby went a color that Harry supposed was pale on a house-elf, which clued Harry into what must be running through the little elf’s mind.

“Oh no Dobby, I won’t be doing anything dark or evil, I promise. I just want some more freedom is all, and there are many, including Dumbledore, who don’t think that it’s a good idea for me to have any.”

Dobby looked relieved at that, “Of course Harry Pot.....of course Harry, a house-elf is bound to keep his master’s secrets.”

“Ok Dobby, first things first, don’t ever call me master.” Harry held up a hand to forestall Dobby’s objections. “Yes I know I technically will be your master, but I’m uncomfortable with being called that, please respect my wishes on that.”

Dobby looked a bit dubious, but nodded all the same.

“So you’re hired then, I’ll pay you 50 galleons a month, with time off to be decided later. You won’t have much to do in all reality, it will be two years before I have a house of my own, so you will just be helping me here, and at school.”

“Dobby is pleased that Harry Potter is thinking about his future, and is proud to be his house-elf. I accept the position.”

“Great Dobby, now here’s the thing…….I….err, I mean we, might not be returning to Hogwarts. In fact we might be leaving Great Britain altogether.”

Here it was, his private plan out in the open for the first time……and confided in first to a house-elf of all things. Harry loved irony as much as the next young man, but this stretched even his limits. Still, he knew that Dobby was safe, even if any advice he gave wouldn’t be worth much.

Dobby was stunned speechless, but he rallied and asked Harry if he was serious.

“I’m very serious Dobby. I’m not entirely sure I can bring it off this quickly, so it might not happen until next year. It is something I’ve been thinking a lot about Dobby, and at the very least I want to put the pieces in place. What I would like from you in the next few weeks is to be a sounding board for me, even if you’re not sure what I’m talking about it will do me good to get my thoughts out in the open.”

It was just then that Harry realized that the Order might have listening charms on the house. His stomach went queasy, but there was nothing he could do now if the cat was out of the bag. He went to the window and looked outside, but saw nothing unusual. He collected his thoughts and turned back to Dobby.

“Well Dobby, what do you say? Are you with me?”

“Harry does not even need to ask, of course Dobby is with you…….but there is one thing Harry, Dobby is not quite sure how to say it.”

“Go on Dobby, you can tell me anything,” Harry said, thinking it had to do with Dumbledore.

“Well Harry, you see.....ummm.....well this is very embarrassing, but Dobby and Winky have become very close.....” he trailed off, blushing furiously.

Harry was exploding with laughter on the inside, but he kept his face to a smile.

“I take it then Dobby that you do not want to be parted from Winky if possible?”

“Yes Harry Potter.....err, sorry...I mean yes Harry.”

“Do you think that she would want to join you here with me?”

“Oh yes, I showed her your letter and already asked her, she would most like to leave Hogwarts to be a proper house-elf again. She would not need paying, just work is enough for her.”

“Well Dobby of course Winky would be welcome to join us, but like I said, there won’t be much work for even one house-elf, let alone two. I cannot have my Aunt and Uncle know that you are here if possible, at least not living here.”

“It is ok Harry, Dobby and Winky will do what is necessary to protect and serve you.”

“Thank you Dobby, I will rely on you for that. Now all we have to do is find a place for you to sleep at night.”

“Oh that is easy Harry, Dobby and Winky can use the clothes closet, we can make ‘changes’ to it so it will not be too small. Harry’s Aunt and Uncle will not notice us being here if Harry does not want them to.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, this was going much easier than he’d had any right to expect.

“Ok Dobby, come back tomorrow with Winky, and please make sure that Dumbledore does not know where you are going. Just tell him that you found a wizard family to look after and that you and Winky

are going. I'm sure two house-elves won't be missed at such a big place as Hogwarts."

"Ok Harry, we will be seeing you tomorrow."

"Thank you Dobby, I'm glad that you are going to be joining me."

Dobby grinned happily and looked like he was about to leave.

"Oh yeah Dobby, one more thing. I know you can read since you answered my letter, but can you write as well?"

"Oh yes Harry, Dobby can write, Winky can as well."

"Great Dobby, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodbye Harry."

Well that went well Harry thought.....except for the possibility of listening charms, Harry wanted to scream when he thought of how Order members might be ratting him out to that old control freak even now. He decided to hold off writing to Peter Tyson (the solicitor) until tomorrow, by then Hedwig should be back and rested, and the listening charm issue settled one way or another.

Meanwhile, at Grimmauld Place

Remus Lupin paced around the living room, re-reading Harry's letter over and over his mind. The letter bothered him on many levels, not the least of which was an easily detectable veneer of hostility toward him. His first instinct was to go to Privet Drive immediately, even though the letter had expressly told him not to. He was stopped however, by the realization that it would only drive Harry further away from him, since so many of the adults in his life seemed not to care about Harry's wishes. Remus had never been sure of how to talk with Harry, every time he looked at Harry he was reminded of James and Lily. Sirius got past that by basically talking to Harry as he would have talked to James, being more Harry's friend than his mentor. Remus couldn't help but think of Harry as his student, and tried for more of an uncle role....a role that he wished Sirius had taken on. Then again,

Remus had had many more years to deal with James and Lily being dead than Sirius had, and it had undoubtedly altered the way he looked at it.....Sirius had been somewhat different after all those years in Azkaban, and had even once (at least to Remus' knowledge) accidentally referred to Harry as 'James'.

Remus was aware of Harry's distaste for his relatives, and had argued with Dumbledore privately until he was blue in the face, but the Headmaster had been adamant that Harry go back there for at least a month, to renew the blood protections. Remus was one of the few Order members who had known about why exactly Harry needed to go back to Privet Drive (Snape and McGonagall were the others Dumbledore had shared this with), and while he accepted Dumbledore's assurance that Harry would be safe, he thought that Dumbledore was just being lazy in not trying to find a more comfortable spot for Harry.

He still had a rough time accepting that Sirius was gone, every morning he expected to come down the stairs and see Sirius at breakfast, only to be shaken slightly at the emptiness. Remus had led a hard life up until now, but all his Marauder friends were dead.....and Remus quite considered Peter Pettigrew to be dead in all but body.....and he was alone. Remus had often thought of leaving Britain to try for a new life elsewhere, but he remained, bent on bringing down Voldemort, to avenge his friends. Remus did not know the exact contents of the Prophecy, but like so many others he could imagine what it said. He knew that Dumbledore had finally told Harry what the Prophecy entailed, but not of Harry's reaction to it.....though he could easily surmise it.

After thinking on it for a bit, Remus decided to leave Harry alone for now, if that's what he wanted. Sometimes teenagers just needed some time to deal with their issues, and while Harry often time looked and was forced to act much older than his years, he was still just a kid, not quite 16 years old. He only hoped that Harry wouldn't try to kill Snape next week when he arrived for his Occlumency lessons, as much as Remus hated Snape (and he had a long, long history with the man), he knew that Harry hated him more.....in point of fact he assumed that Harry probably put Snape on a level with Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy, right below Voldemort.

Thursday, July 19th 1996

Dear Mr. Tyson,

Hello, good day to you. My name is Harry Potter and I have need of your services as a solicitor and would like to schedule an appointment so we can discuss some things. Nora Longbottom recommended you to me and spoke very highly of your work. Travel is a bit dodgy for me at the moment, but I will make my way to Diagon Alley to speak with you whenever you can spare the time. Sooner would be better though, as some of the problems I have are somewhat time sensitive.

I look forward to hearing back from you sir,

Harry Potter

Hedwig had come back late the previous afternoon and Harry reluctantly told her of his new house-elf arrangement. She accepted it without much hooting however, and seemed resigned to the loss of her quiet time. Harry assured her that she would have more letters to deliver than she had lately, so she didn't have to spend so much time at Privet Drive. She went off to Peter Tyson's office, with instructions to wait for his reply.

Thus far there had been no sign that the Order knew what he was up to, Harry figured if they hadn't stormed the place by now, they never would. Harry was a bit puzzled at the lack of foresight, perhaps they thought he was no threat to disobey them. He found this rich, he was supposed to kill the most powerful wizard in recent memory (he wasn't too clear on the war over Grindewald, having not paid much attention in History class), yet the rest of the time he had to be a good little boy and do what he was told. Sometimes the dichotomy of his life made him laugh. If only Ron and his latent jealousy realized what Harry would do for a normal wizarding life.

Harry had known for over a year now that it would come down to he and Voldemort in some sort of final combat, though not why this would be. Hearing the Prophecy had explained quite a bit to Harry,

such as why Voldemort had targeted his parents of all people (to this day Harry didn't even know what his parents did for a living after Hogwarts, when he had asked Hagrid or Sirius they changed the subject). Harry understood that whether or not he believed the Prophecy, and he wasn't sure yet if he did, Voldemort and Dumbledore believed it (even if Voldemort didn't know the whole thing), and this belief drove many of their actions toward him.

By early afternoon Dobby and Winky had come by, with their few belongings and begun to settle in. Harry had warned Dobby that there wasn't much to do yet, but when they came right before lunch Dobby assured Harry that both he and Winky each had a hobby that they used to divert themselves on their days off. Dobby's hobby was making clothes, Winky's was art, a talent she never knew she had while working for the Crouch's. As Harry had expected, Winky had refused to take money, though she did agree after some persuading that Harry could pay her in art supplies. Actually persuading wasn't the word, Harry had to order her to accept the supplies. Winky had opened her mouth to object.....but realized she couldn't object to an order and still be a proper house-elf. Dobby watched this by-play with no small amount of amusement, and joined in to insist that Winky wear some sort of clothes, or at least clean the ones she. She agreed eventually and everyone was happy with how things had turned out. Harry stressed that his relatives were not to know that the elves were there until Harry was ready, Dobby immediately snapped his fingers at the door and said that the Dursleys wouldn't hear any noise short of a banshee cry from this room anymore.

Hedwig returned around 3 pm with a short note from Peter Tyson:

Mr. Potter,

I was pleasantly surprised to receive your communication, and I would be happy to talk with you. Nora Longbottom sent me a missive yesterday saying that I should expect to hear from you, but even still.....She had nothing but nice things to say about you, which is quite rare you should know. I can promise you that I am not a member of the Order of the Phoenix, though I know of its existence, so my loyalties are not entwined there. I was one year behind Bill Weasley at Hogwarts and succeeded him as Head Boy, we have

remained friends over the years and I'm aware of his membership. Attorney-client privilege is the same in the wizarding world as in the muggle world Mr. Potter, so anything you tell me is automatically private.

I know something of your living situation in Surrey (don't be alarmed, most of the wizarding world knows that you live with your muggle relatives during the summer, they simply don't know where), and I realize that Headmaster Dumbledore must have you on a rather short leash, especially with Voldemort back.....yes Mr. Potter, I can write his name without having a heart attack. If you like, I can pop around your house around lunch time, I can bring some sandwiches and we can have our chat. Don't worry, I often wear muggle clothes, so I won't look out of place in your neighborhood and cause any concern. If this is acceptable to you, simply do nothing and we will meet tomorrow, if it isn't, send your owl back to me with an alternative plan.

I look forward to meeting you,

Peter Tyson

Harry couldn't have asked for more than this, and was highly pleased. Things were falling into place for him, he just had to stay lucky a bit longer and he would be free.

Friday, July 20 1996

9:00 am

Harry woke up from yet another dream-less sleep, feeling very rested. Harry had been wondering why Voldemort wasn't toying with him lately, he figured that his nemesis would be after him full tilt, taunting about the loss of his godfather. Harry pondered about what turned Tom Riddle into what he had become, he remembered the teenage Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets telling him how closely their lives seemed to parallel. Of all the things Riddle had said to him, that rocked him the most, and gave him the most pause. Harry didn't really think he would turn dark, after all, when Voldemort had offered to help he resurrect his parents during first year he hadn't been tempted.....and if that wouldn't do it, nothing would. Harry felt he

didn't need any of the supposed benefits of being dark; The idea of power didn't do much for him, he had little desire to make people fear him or do his bidding; Money? He had enough of that, judging by what was in his vault.....his vault!

Uh oh. Harry went over to his desk and whipped out some parchment and wrote a quick letter to Gringotts:

Dear Gringotts manager,

I was wondering if it would be possible to get a balance statement of my account. I may need to make some large type purchases over the next month or so and I would like an idea of how much I have to spend. If possible as well, I would like you to include 1,000 galleons spread over several bank drafts. I'm sorry to put you to any trouble, but I am unable to get to Diagon Alley in the immediate future and must conduct my business this way. I have enclosed my key, as proof that I am who I say I am.

Thank you for your attention,

Harry James Potter

He folded the letter up, the key inside, and taped it shut. Hedwig grabbed it and went on her way, looking happy for the exercise.

Harry literally had no idea what he was worth, money-wise, and decided that if he was going to hire a solicitor that this might be useful information to have at his disposal. Once again Harry was appalled at how little he knew about his own affairs. Harry hadn't even been to his vault in 3 years, since his short time living over The Leaky Cauldron. He had no clue what solicitors cost to hire, but figured the 1,000 galleons would suffice, plus if Gringotts didn't do that sort of thing, there might as well be some benefit to being the "famous Harry Potter" and he assumed that Tyson would think him good for it. Plus, and he knew it might come to this: He might have to disappear for awhile and live like a muggle, and it would be nice to know if he could afford to do so.

Dobby and Winky came out, and apparated away to get breakfast. Harry had enough galleons on hand to feed the three of them for the next few weeks, particularly with two house-elves who didn't seem to eat much. Harry had had a firm talk with Winky the previous night before bed about her butterbeer problem, she promised that she wouldn't drink any as long as Harry said not to. Harry himself liked butterbeer well enough, but he would rather have a Coke than anything.....the things Harry missed most about the muggle world when he was away at the Burrow or Hogwarts were Coke and pizza.

Harry debated on whether to warn Aunt Petunia about his forthcoming visitor, he wasn't sure what to do about that. On the one hand, if he didn't warn her she might slam the door in Mr. Tyson's face and not let him inside.....then again she might do so if he did warn her. Petunia tended to be much quieter and less hostile when Vernon wasn't around, so that was a plus and he could exploit it. Harry knew that a doorbell ringing was coming, because if the Order had any wards on the house they would have anti-apparition ones on it, negating Tyson just popping into his bedroom.....unless of course he was a house-elf like Dobby and Winky, who seemingly could go wherever they wished, wards or not. Harry smiled at this thought, and wondered that a person could do pretty well as a burglar with two house-elves as his accomplices.

One more concern was the Order members outside watching the house, what would they do? Harry had noted Tyson's comment about owning muggle clothes and knew that it would not attract too much attention from the outside if Tyson were dressed in a suit, after all muggle salesmen wore suits and called on houses all the time. The worry was if someone recognized him and reported it, after all if Tyson was a former Head Boy at Hogwarts, then everyone there when he was would have known him. Harry thought about all of the Order member he had met, and only Tonks and Bill Weasley fit this criteria, Bill the more so since he and Tyson were friends. Oh well, there was nothing he could do about this, yet another small risk to take.

The one thing that kept Harry going in all of this planning, was knowing that there really was no downside to trying it....after all, could his imprisonment get worse than this? He didn't think it could,

thus there was no more harm that could be done to him. An added benefit was how he was going about it, Harry knew that if he just went off half-cocked and ran away that he would be caught, and likely kept out of things as long as possible. Harry had decided to keep things nice and legal-like just in case he was found out, for the sake of his credibility.....credibility that had already been cashed in with Mrs. Longbottom and Peter Tyson. Harry had always been more results oriented than a thinker and planner, but he was becoming more and more enamored of what happened when one combined the two.

The elves came back, and the three of them shared their breakfast of bagels and cream cheese. Harry told them that there would a visitor at around noon, and asked them to conjure up a couple of chairs (there was only one in the room) for them to sit on. He told them that he would like them to stay for the meeting, as it would directly affect them as well as he, and he wanted them to hear about it firsthand. Dobby looked shocked that Harry would include them, but realized that Harry wanted them there as much to be bodyguards as witnesses. He asked Harry if that was the case, surprising Harry with his insight. Harry allowed that it might come to that, he had never met Tyson and didn't know him from Adam, just from a recommendation from a woman he had never met. It didn't hurt to be careful, Harry told them, it was as much for their safety as his.

Meanwhile, at The Burrow:

Ron Weasley poked around the house, doing his chores, more tired than in any summer in recent memory. Fred and George had opened their joke shop, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, the previous week and had hired Ron and Ginny as part-time help. Ron and Ginny each worked every other day for about six hours a pop, and received enough galleons that they weren't going to need to worry about pocket money for the coming school year. The downside was that the twins turned out to be taskmasters at work, making Ron run around like a whirling dervish. There were usually four of them in the shop at any given time: Fred, George, Lee Jordan, and either Ron or Ginny and they were all kept hopping the first week. This was Ron's first real taste of work that didn't involve de-gnoming, cleaning his room, or Hogwarts' detentions, and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

Like Harry, Ron wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life after Hogwarts. His career counseling session with Professor McGonagall had been much quieter than Harry's, though Ron had enjoyed Harry's recounting of it, he loved the idea of McGonagall screaming at Umbridge and making her back down. During his session, Ron had broached the idea of becoming an Auror, because it looked like it would be interesting work and a chance to be more involved in the war, which Ron privately believed was going to last a long time. However, while McGonagall had been as diplomatic as possible (for her), she had told Ron that his grades did not bode well for achieving the OWL and NEWT scores necessary to qualify for Auror training. Ron was crushed when he learned this, thinking he would be the only one of his mates not to get into the program. Ron knew that Hermione would get the grades to enter whatever profession she choose, and he figured that his famous friend Harry would be greased into the Auror program if its what he wanted.

Ron was, surprisingly enough for a 16 year old, reasonably self-aware, and knew enough of his own limitations to be worried about his future. He knew that he didn't have Hermione's brains or Harry's raw wizard power. In point of fact, Ron thought that he was a meld of the two, with better than average smarts and more power than Hermione had thus far shown. When Ron did his own playback of the DOM, he felt that he had fought pretty well, though not as well as Harry. What was holding him back was his being a bit lazy, something Hermione was constantly hectoring him about. Hectoring though, that was finally starting to penetrate, and he was resolved to do much better in school during his last two years.

Ron had always been devoted to Hermione, even though he had long been one of her constant critics, and he had finally worked up the nerve to tell her how he really felt about her, telling her the week before that he was in love with her.....and although it took her totally by surprise, one look at the expression on his face had told her was deadly serious. She had grabbed him in a fierce embrace and whispered to him that she had always loved him too. They had been a couple now for an entire week, and the smile had never left Ron's mind, though they had not officially told anyone (Ginny knew though, the twins had placed some Listening Charms for her).

Hermione had for so long been the major female presence in Ron's Hogwarts life that every other girl he compared to her just didn't measure up on most levels. He had always figured, pretty accurately, that the field was pretty clear if he wanted to date Hermione, none of his roommates would go for her (Harry was mistaken when he thought that Ron hadn't picked up on his irritation with Hermione) and Ron was aware that Hermione was not terribly popular with the rest of the House, though that did not particularly bother him. The fact was, he felt he was now mature enough to deserve her, and maybe tonight was the right time to bring everything out into the open (Hermione was doing a summer study program at a university in her hometown, but came over most nights to The Burrow on The Knight Bus). There was Harry to consider of course, even though Ron knew Harry didn't want Hermione for himself.....indeed he thought that if they ever became a couple one of them would be dead inside of a week.....Harry might feel shut out, like the two of them didn't need him anymore, which might be why he had requested no letters, maybe he had figured it out or something.

Girl problems aside, Ron still didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. Fred and George, while having no problem giving Ron a part-time job, had made it clear that his future wasn't in WWW unless the business expanded greatly. Ron supposed he could always get a job in his dad's office (the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office), but the idea of spending decades fussing over enchanted teapots and flying carpets left him cold. Quidditch wasn't a consideration, unless got much better over the next 2 years.....which was possible of course. Ron decided to leave this train of thought until after he had looked at his OWL scores and seen what his options might be. Meanwhile, if he was going to get better as a Keeper, he had better go do some flying.

Privet Drive, Noon

A tall man in a dark blue Saville Row suit strode up Privet Drive with briefcase in hand. He checked the numbers on the houses as he went past, looking for a particular one, Number 4. Having found it, he walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell.

"Hello there, you are Mrs. Dursley I presume?"

“Yes I am, may I help you?”

“Yes, my name is Peter Tyson and I am a solicitor. I am here to see your nephew Harry Potter.”

This rocked Petunia, she had assumed him to be normal, but he must be one of ‘them’ if he wanted to see Harry. She was about to close the door when Harry rushed up to stop her.

“Hello, you must be Mr. Tyson, I’m Harry Potter. Won’t you come in?” With a subtle movement of his body he made it so that Tyson had room to enter the house, which he did.

“I’m pleased to meet you Mr. Potter, where would you like to have our discussion?”

“Upstairs in my room sir, right this way.”

Petunia looked as if she might object, but Harry and his guest just smiled pleasantly at her and went on their way upstairs, leaving her with a confused expression on her face.

Once in Harry’s room, an appallingly small one Tyson noticed, Harry introduced him to Dobby and Winky and they all sat down.

“So what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting Mr. Potter?”

“Please sir, call me Harry.”

“As long as you call me Peter, I’m not yet a sir, as the muggle queen doesn’t know I exist.”

Both of them smiled at the joke, and some of the tension in the room was lifted.

“Peter, before we talk about that I would like to formally hire you as my solicitor, so that all we talk about today will be kept legally private.”

Oh this was going to be good, Peter thought. This kid certainly plans ahead doesn't he?

"Harry, I accept the position as your solicitor, therefore this entire conversation is between the two of us.....sorry, the four of us (Dobby and Winky smiled shyly at this). We can discuss my fee after we decide what I'm going to be doing for you."

"Terrific. The first thing I would like you to do is do a scan on this house, and find out what wards and spells are in place. I know there must be at least a couple, and I would be interested to know what they are."

"A suspicious one aren't you? Not that I blame you of course. Let's give it a go."

Peter took out his wand and mumbled some incantations that Harry couldn't make out clearly and did some wand motions that looked like a muggle radar screen.

"Interesting, very interesting. There are probably more spells on this house than any muggle house in Britain. There is an anti-apparition ward on the house, which I fully expected to be here, hence my ringing the doorbell. By the way, in case you were wondering, I would not have forced my way inside had she slammed the door in my face.....yes Harry, I could tell that's what she was about to do. I have no interest in letting your minders outside, there are three of them by the way in two different locations, know that you have a wizard visiting you, as they would not likely let that visit go uninterrupted. There is one listening charm focused on the living room, and an anti-portkey charm on the whole house itself. There are no less than four tracking charms on you, as well as one on your trunk and two on your owl's cage. There is also a silencing charm on your door here, and an enlarging charm on the closet, which I assume you know about."

Harry nodded, "Yes, Dobby is the one who did those spells, so that my Aunt and Uncle wouldn't know that the elves are here.....so the listening charm would only pick up things said in the living room? Nothing else in here?"

“Correct, given that the silencing charm in here will totally muffle anything said in here, even at a yell. Good move though, hiring House Elves, keeps you nice and clean.”

“Right, I would prefer to say on the right side of the law, whatever I might think of it.”

“ Well Harry there are no other spells currently on the house....I’m guessing you’re worried about potential listening charms?”

“Yes Peter, I don’t want Dumbledore’s people to know what I’m planning, they would be in here in a minute to try and stop me.”

“ Stop you from doing what Harry, what is it you have in mind to do? I have a good idea, but I’d like to hear it from you.”

“Put simply Peter, I want to gain legal emancipation in both the wizarding world and the muggle world, so that I can begin to make my own decisions, without any interference.”

“Well Harry, that’s what I thought you would say, based on your letter yesterday. I did a bit of research into you and learned more than a little of what we would need to get that freedom. Am I right in assuming that you have not discussed this with your relatives?”

“Yes, the only ones I have mentioned it to are in this room.”

“Ok, easy things first. Emancipating you in the muggle world will be pretty simple, as long as your Aunt and Uncle sign off on it. The wizarding world will be a bit harder, but its still workable, since there is only one more year until you are an adult anyway. Yesterday afternoon after I received your owl, I sent a message to my wife, who happens to work in the Records Department at the Ministry of Magic, requesting that she make a copy of your file on the sly. Would you like to see it?”

Harry looked shocked, “I have a file? For what?”

“Oh we all have files Harry, there aren’t that many wizards in Great Britain and the Ministry likes to keep tabs on us.”

“Sure, I’d be very interested in seeing it.”

Peter opened his briefcase, and after tossing sandwiches to Harry and his elves, took out a folder and handed it to Harry

Harry James Potter

Date of birth: July 31, 1980

Place of birth: Godric’s Hollow, Wales

Current Place of Residence: Little Whinging, Surrey

Blood: Mixed

Criminal Record: One count of Underage Magic, 1992

Hogwarts House: Gryffindor

Class Rank: 7th out of 39

OWL results: TBA

NEWT results: TBA

Parents:

James William Potter

DOB: April 12, 1959

DOD: October 31, 1981

Occupation: Chaser, Puddlemere United

Lily Marie Evans Potter

DOB: May 13, 1959

DOD: October 31, 1981

Occupation: Ancient Runes Professor, Hogwarts

Guardians: Petunia Evans Dursley and Vernon Dursley, muggles

Relationship: maternal Aunt and husband

The rest of the file had newspaper clippings of his various exploits, copies of his year-end grades during his five years at school, and an anonymous report listing his various spell casting strengths.

Harry sat there quietly for a minute, "You know before this I never even knew what my parents did for a living."

"You must be kidding."

Harry shook his head, "No one would tell me Peter, they always changed the subject."

Peter didn't know what to say to this, this kid's entire family history had been denied him. Peter Tyson was no lover of Dumbledore, but he had until this time at least respected him, but this was beyond the pale. Peter knew that only Dumbledore could have imposed that level of silence on his staff and associates.

"Well Harry, if I was unsure before, I'm not now. I'll do what I can to help you get your freedom. I would, however, like to know what you hope to accomplish with it. You do, for all intents and purposes, have only three more months left outside of Hogwarts and the underage magic rules before your 17th birthday. Are you intending to leave Hogwarts early? I know Fred and George Weasley made a big splash by doing it, but they had a clearly defined plan of what to do once they did."

"Peter, if I am able to gain my freedom I would like to explore continuing my education outside of Great Britain and Hogwarts, possibly in America or Canada"

Silence dominated the room as Harry's words sunk in to his audience. Dobby and Winky knew the plan of course, but it still hadn't seemed real until Harry had spoken it to someone else.

"Well Harry.....I must say that I pride myself on rarely being surprised, but I have to admit that you just qualified for the 'rarely'. I had assumed that you simply wanted to do some spell practice.....or to get out of living with your relatives."

"Why did you think I wanted to get out of living here? I thought this place and my life here was supposed to be secret."

"Harry, most of the wizarding world knows that you live with muggles who don't like magic. There have been a few articles in the Daily Prophet, and your schoolmates haven't been terribly close-mouthed about your home life as they know it. Now how many know you live here in Little Whinging? Probably not many, other than Dumbledore and his people. I found out, as I mentioned, through my wife and her records access. What I don't know is why you haven't been attacked here, Voldemort's people aren't the brightest lot in the country, but at least one of them must know how to do some muggle information research to find you mother's relations and where they might be."

"The Ministry knows Peter, Umbridge sent those Dementors after me last summer, and she knew right where to direct them."

"So that's how the Dementors got here, I'd always wondered about that. She admitted this to you?"

"Yes she did, in front of about a dozen witnesses.....though half of them want me dead, so I doubt they would vouch for me. Speaking of which, she hasn't been arrested or anything? I would hope that Remus or Dumbledore would have mentioned it to me."

"Remus, as in Remus Lupin?"

"Right, do you know him?"

"I know of him.....famous Marauder, werewolf, former instructor of yours if I recall correctly." Sees Harry's reaction to the Marauder

comment, "Oh yes Harry, the Marauders were famous, even though I didn't get a chance to go to school with any of them I hear many a story about their pranks.....particularly when Snape showed up my 4th year to teach Potions, when that happened a lot of stories were recycled."

In spite of the seriousness of the situation Harry couldn't help but smile. Anytime Snape was held up to ridicule was fine with him.

"As to why the Death Eater's haven't attacked me? I guess it must be because of the blood protection that my aunt gives me, no one is supposed to be able to harm me in the house, magically anyway."

"Hmmmm...interesting, that tells me something...so let me ask you this Harry, how much news have you gotten since you came back here for break?"

"Nothing, I don't get the Daily Prophet anymore since all they do is print lies and half truths

about me, and The Quibbler isn't what one could call a News-type paper."

Peter laughed at that one, he remember that there was a Lovegood daughter at Hogwarts now and Harry must know her to have given The Quibbler that kind of access, access he had never in fact granted to a newspaper before.

"Well Harry, your close personal friend Umbridge has not been seen, rumor has it she's either in seclusion somewhere, or in St. Mungo's under a false name. Whatever you kids did to her at the end of the year must have been something. Bill told me about the swamp that the twins used in the hallway, I haven't had such a good laugh in a long time.....and I understand you had something to do with their joke shop?"

"Yes I did, though that's not common knowledge. I gave them my Tri-Wizard winnings."

“That’s what I thought....not about the Tri-Wizard winnings, but most people who know Fred and George are assuming that you are their backer, given that the Weasley family is not a rich one....how could it be, with seven kids....and you are their one rich friend. I don’t think Molly has deduced it yet, or maybe she has and just doesn’t want to admit it, Bill says that she dotes on you. When you come to Diagon Alley next we’ll make a point to stop there. Anyway, back to what I was saying, about news.....Fudge is hanging on so far, he came clean in the press about his inactions and the public seems to be buying it as simply an overworked man’s errors in judgment.”

Harry started laughing when he heard that, then stopped when he thought about it, did he want Fudge still in office? He voiced this concern to Peter.

“I think for the moves you have in mind Harry, that you do want Fudge still as Minister, given that Dumbledore is certainly going to oppose us. I’m going to assume (there’s that word again) that you don’t know much about the wizarding political system, given that you’re not a Ravenclaw, and thus don’t pay any attention in History of Magic.” He smiled when he said this, so Harry didn’t take what was in fact a true statement as an insult.

“Harry, the Minister of Magic is elected by a public vote every five years, the next scheduled election being in April, 1998. This is Fudge’s third term in office, and he has given no indication that he wants to retire. A Minister, or any department head for that matter, can be removed by a $\frac{3}{4}$ vote of the Wizengamot, a body with which you are now familiar after last August I imagine. The Wizengamot is made up of forty witches and wizards, who serve ten year terms. Members generally are re-appointed for life unless they are hit by a major scandal and choose to resign, or of course if they die. So thirty members of the Wizengamot must agree to remove Fudge, and you should know that after the Lestranges were broken out of Azkaban that Fudge did survive a no-confidence vote, only seventeen members voted to kick him out. Most of the rest said that it either wasn’t Fudge’s fault or just wasn’t enough to impeach the head of our government.

“Another factor Harry is that there isn’t really a bona-fide person to replace Fudge, since everyone knows that Dumbledore won’t take on the job, though there isn’t the demand for that that there once was. The usual names mentioned are Amelia Bones, Amos Diggory, and Manuel Zabini, I believe you know, or knew their children?”

“Yes I do, though Susan Bones is Amelia’s niece, not daughter. Blaise Zabini is a 6th year Slytherin, and Cedric...” Harry went quiet at that point, and Peter gave him a minute to collect himself.

“So anyway, none of those three has the widespread support to galvanize an impeachment movement, though I would expect at least two of them to run against Fudge in the next election. The muggles have a saying ‘you have to knock the champ out, its not enough to beat him on points’, that’s the attitude here.”

“What about you, are you interested in someday becoming Minister?”

Peter smiled, he got this question a lot from muggleborns who always saw people in his profession go for Parliament.

“No Harry, I have no interest in what really is a thankless job. I do, however, intend to stand for the Wizengamot when I reach proper age, you must be 35 to be a member, so I have eight years to go. That’s the extent of my desire to participate in government, and even that is because I believe it will help solidify my legal practice.

Harry digested all of this, he found this fascinating and a bit odd, finally an adult wizard was talking to him person-to-person and not evading his questions. Another occurred to him to ask:

“How many wizards are there in Britain Peter?”

“Roughly 20,000 or so Harry, with somewhere around 1 million around the world. That gives the muggles a 6,000 to 1 population advantage on us Harry, you must remember that whenever the Pureblood brigade mocks and insults Muggles, its that ratio that’s in the back of their mind, if not the front. They know that if the muggles ever found out about us and came after us in force, we wouldn’t stand a chance.....our shields don’t stop bullets Harry.”

Harry ruminated on that for a minute, it certainly explained a lot about muggle/wizard relations, and why there had to be the kind of secrecy that there was.

“How much does the muggle government know about us?”

“Not much ,the Prime Minister.....John Major for the time being, is briefed when he takes office, though a charm is placed on him so that he can't talk about us to just anyone. The Royal family knows, some of them over the years have been our kind, though none have ever been King or Queen.”

Harry had heard about the very interesting Windsor family, they were always being talked about in the muggle newspapers, he was amused at the idea of one or more of them being wizards.

“Back to what we were talking about.....though I what you're telling me is very interesting.....why would it be better for me for Fudge to be in power? He's not my biggest fan you know, he's never believed anything I've said, about Voldemort being back, or Sirius being innocent.”

“Hang on a minute, you're telling me that Quibbler stuff was true about Sirius Black? That wasn't one of Joe Lovegood's 'inventions'?”

“It was true, Sirius Black was innocent of my parents' murder, it was their other friend, Peter Pettigrew....yes, another Marauder....that set them up and betrayed them to Voldemort.”

Harry paused for a minute, understanding how incomplete his stories must be to Peter. “Peter, would you like me to tell you what my Hogwarts life has been like? I know you must have heard some of it, but if you have the time perhaps you'd like to hear all of it, the truth this time, rather than rumor. I mean, I don't want to keep you from other appointments.....”

Dang this was a polite kid, how on earth did wind up like this with that woman raising him?

“This is my last appointment for the day Harry, I was going to spend the rest of my afternoon doing paperwork, but its nothing that can't wait. Fire away.”

Harry spent the next two hours telling his story, telling Peter how he found out about being a wizard, to meeting Ron on the train, the search for the Philosopher's Stone, which Peter had actually heard of, he had met Nicholas Flamel before. Harry took Peter, figuratively anyway, down into the Chamber of Secrets with him and told about how most of the school had believed he was the Heir of Slytherin.....something Peter found hilarious in its absurdity, he assured Harry that the Sorting Hat didn't have quite so large a sense of humor to put the Heir of Slytherin into Gryffindor House. People will believe anything, Peter told him. Harry described his Dementor experiences, and how Remus had taught him his Patronus, a spell that Peter admitted that he had never tried to cast...and hoped never to need to. Sirius Black was talked about, and the revelations in the Shrieking Shack about who actually had betrayed his parents. The Tri-Wizard Tournament was more public knowledge, but Barty Crouch Jr. was not, Peter had had no idea that Crouch had been teaching students at Hogwarts for an entire school year right under Dumbledore's nose. Peter knew all about Umbridge and her insanities, though not about the blood quill and the threat of Cruciatus. He described in detail what happened at the Department of Mysteries, and how he had not only watched Sirius fall through the Veil, and that he had used an Unforgivable on Bellatrix Lestrange, his godfather's murderer. Harry reflected on his friends, his enemies (particularly Draco Malfoy and Snape), and how truly lonely was, in spite of being the most famous 16 year old wizard in the world.

Finally, Harry shared the full text of the Prophecy with Peter, something he had not done with Ron or Hermione. He felt that Peter should know the whole truth, if only for his own safety (Peter's safety).

After he was done, Harry looked exhausted, and Peter could tell that this was a story that Harry had never told in its entirety. Dobby and Winky ran over to him when it was over and hugged him tightly, as Harry struggled to keep control of his emotions. Peter too was visibly moved, he wasn't quite sure what to say to Harry at this moment. Here was the oldest 15 year old kid that he had ever met. Peter had

known that Harry had been through some hard times over the last few years, but nothing like what he had just heard. Just looking at Harry's face when it was done told him that every word was true.

"Harry, why you don't you go to the loo and splash some water on your face, I need a few minutes to think."

Harry blanched, as he thought that Peter might be leaving, but Peter anticipated this:

"No Harry, I'm not going back on our deal, you've just hit me with quite the recollection and I need to let it sink in. Dobby and Winky can stay and make sure I don't do anything rash," he smiled weakly.

Harry left the room and the room descended back into silence. Hedwig tapped at the window, which Harry had closed earlier, Peter looked at Dobby who nodded, and opened the window. Hedwig flew in with a thick envelope and went to her water bowl.

Harry came back in the room, looking better than he had when he left. He and Peter watched each other for a minute, and Peter pointed out to him that his owl had returned. Harry went over and stroked Hedwig for a minute, thanking her for all the great work she had done for him. Hedwig did the owl version of a cat's purr, and this seemed to give Harry some strength back, as he opened the envelope, it was from Gringott's.

Dear Mr. Potter

We received your note this morning and are happy to comply with your requests, as they are perfectly normal for someone with your background. We have enclosed a total of 5 bank drafts that spread evenly the 1,000 galleons you requested, if you require anymore don't hesitate to send your owl to come get them.

Here is a list of your total assets:

665,308 galleons currently are in your vault at the Diagon Alley branch of Gringotts

30,239 galleons are currently in your vault at the Orion Alley branch of Gringotts in Toronto, Canada

You have no spending limits Mr. Potter, the 1,200 galleons that you have removed over the previous 5 years have not made a dent, nor is the 4,000 galleons a year that Hogwarts removes a burden on you. We remind you that the will of Sirius Black still needs to be read, you are a beneficiary along with Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin, your assets will no doubt increase significantly, as the Black estate is a large one.

If you have any further inquiries or transactions, don't hesitate to send us an owl.

Fortrap

Senior Account Manager

Gringotts Bank

Diagon Alley, London

Harry handed over the letter to Peter without a word, Peter read it also without comment, though he was internally relieved that this wouldn't be a pro-bono client. He knew that if this matter went as far as he thought it possible, his career would either make a giant leap or a large drop.....taking on Albus Dumbledore was not to be done lightly.

"Ok Harry.....where do I start.....I'm glad you shared that with me Harry, both your story and your financial statement. The story explains quite a bit, and the money means that you have the resources to walk away, or at the very least to convincingly threaten it. You appear to be bothered most about your lack of say in your life, coupled with the fact that each year you've been at Hogwarts someone has either tried to kill you or suck your soul out." Harry nodded his agreement with both statements

"Harry, who else knows about the Prophecy?"

“Dumbledore, and the four of us. Voldemort knows the first part of it, but not the last. That’s what he was trying to con me into giving him at the Department of Mysteries. His lackeys likely know that there IS a prophecy, but little or nothing about what it contains.”

“You haven’t told any of your friends? Not that I would want to either, but they did wind up risking their lives to protect its secret.”

“I haven’t told them.....well to protect them I guess. Dumbledore said that no one should know, so that Voldemort couldn’t torture the information out of them.”

“Are you sure that Dumbledore hasn’t told anyone else? Such as Snape, or your friend Lupin?”

“He claims that he hasn’t, although I won’t speak for what he might have said since the holidays started.”

“Harry, speak plainly to me now, your gut feeling.....do you believe this Prophecy?”

“I don’t know Peter, I just don’t know. I mean it certainly explains why Voldemort came after me when I was just a baby. I had thought that he just hated my parents, since they were members of the Order (he had described the Order of the Phoenix to Peter during the story, but not most of its members or its location) and were on the light side.....but I just can’t get past the fact that it was Trelawney who was the one who gave it, I just have a hard time believing that anything she says is the gospel.”

“Well I don’t blame you there, Ravenclaws don’t usually take Divination Harry, so I never had the pleasure of her classes (both of them smirked when he said that), or of even meeting her, she never came down from her blessed tower.....though now I’m wondering if Dumbledore keeps her hidden up there, to prevent anyone from using Occlumency to break into that fragile head of hers.”

“Dumbledore believes every word of it Peter, that’s why he keeps me locked up here just like Trelawney.”

“True, very true....which makes his Hogwarts’ decisions that much more puzzling. How on earth could he not have suspected something from Quirrel or Crouch/Moody? A known Death Eater not only teaching an important course, but being a head of House? Snape didn’t take over Slytherin until I had left, but I couldn’t believe it when I heard of it. Now Harry, do you honestly believe that your friend Hermione is informing on you?”

“I don’t want to believe it, and I know that if she is doing it she’s thinks she’s protecting me.....but the facts seem to bear it out. Hermione worships authority, I think if Dumbledore or McGonagall said it was for my own good, she’d tell them what I was doing, or what I’m planning. Add to that Ron and Ginny, she spends a lot more time with them than I do, and Hermione can ferret out information from Ron without him probably knowing about it.”

“Its safe to say then, that you have no intention of sharing this with her, your ‘relocation plans’?”

“Absolutely not, I’ll write her a nice long letter when I’m on the plane, if that’s in fact what I wind up doing.”

“But why leave Harry? Why walk away from Great Britain? I’m not saying I blame you, but what’s your reasoning.”

“Peter, I’m tired. I don’t just mean right this minute, but I mean overall. I’m tired. I’m sick of fighting a war where I’m not entirely sure who I’m fighting, I just know I’m not winning. I’m tired of the chore of being the ‘Boy Who Lived’ , either worshipped or hated no matter what I do. People point at my scar like I’m some museum piece, they talk about me in loud tones as if I can’t hear them, or they don’t care if I do. Most of all I’m tired of people being horrible to me for something that I have no control over, I can’t take it anymore, its like pieces of glass in my head, all the time. I’ve had no life Peter, not here at the Dursleys’, not at Hogwarts, not anywhere. I might live to graduate from Hogwarts, I might not.....but why should I bother when my life isn’t mine?”

Harry finally broke down, and his cries of anguish filled the room

Author's Note: That last speech is my nod to The Green Mile (book by Stephen King, screenplay by Frank Darabont), the scene when Michael Clarke Duncan and Tom Hanks are talking is one of my favorite ever movie moments, and this is my homage to it (the pieces of glass line of course, I ripped right from it).

Author's Note: I know that JKR said that the two kids I pair up later in the chapter won't happen, but I like the pairing and I think it makes overall sense (especially after Matt Lewis' performance in the Goblet movie). I'm going to be taking a few liberties with how Occlumency works, in order not to (hopefully anyway) steal from other stories that I've read. Luna is going to be making her debut in this chapter and I just can't get my writing head around her vague talk, so she's going to appear more normal than she does in canon, or in most stories. Let's just say for the sake of argument that the DOM knocked her back on kilter a little bit. Oh, and I have no earthly idea how the British (or American for that matter) procedure for child emancipation works, what I do here will just be a story device, that's all.

Peter and the elves sat in the room quietly, almost afraid to move. After about a minute Harry seemed to stiffen, and looked up, no longer crying.

Peter quietly asked, "Did that help Harry? Letting all of that out?"

"Yes it did, I feel a lot better thank you.....and thank you for listening Peter. Everyone else I talk to about things like that always go 'oh it will be alright Harry' or 'you have to get past it'; or my favorite one 'calm down'.....does anyone ever calm down after being told to like that?"

"I wouldn't think so," Peter laughed and some of the emotion in the room dissipated. Peter leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment, lost in thought.

"Ok Harry, here's the thing.....I'm going to ask a few questions, both for my own information and to get you thinking about what to do next. What we have here is a broad plan, which we need to narrow down. After that I'm going to leave for the night, and come back tomorrow. I want to give you the night to think about some things Harry: whether or not you really want to do this, perhaps this talk was the catharsis you've needed to carry on; how far you're willing to go to defy Dumbledore.....now don't even say it, I know he isn't your boss, but he acts like it and his people are going to enforce it whether you and I like it or not; where you want to go if you get your freedom right now; if you don't get your freedom in the next month, are you willing to live

as a muggle for a year and wait these people out, I'm positive I can get you emancipated in the muggle world as long as your Aunt and Uncle agree to it. Speaking of which, that's why I'm coming back tomorrow, we need to talk with them and apprise them of what's going on. I'll speak to your Aunt on my way out and assure her that they will like this discussion, since it involves you leaving and never coming back.....I am right in thinking that you never want to come back here?

Harry nodded, the idea of willing coming back here made his skin crawl. "Ok, what do you want to ask me?"

"First, how good is your Occlumency.....be brutally honest here Harry, this is important, and not for the reason you're thinking."

"My Occlumency needs work Peter, there's no way I can keep Voldemort out if he really

wants in."

"That's not who I'm worried about Harry, its Snape and Dumbledore. If they get a hold of you they can break through your mind like a pinata and easily discover all that we've been talking about here. Now you said that Snape is due here a week from today?"

"Yes, Dumbledore only wants him to teach me, he says there's no one else that can do it, and he won't do it himself."

"Well that's one of the few decisions I agree with, given what you've told me about the Order.....no, not the Snape part, I mean about Dumbledore not doing it himself. He wasn't telling you the whole truth when he said that no one else can do it, only a sheltered teenager would believe that there are just three Occlumency experts in the wizarding world (Snape, Dumbledore, and Voldemort), and our Headmaster has done everything in his considerable power to keep you sheltered. There just don't happen to be any other Occlumency experts in the Order or at Hogwarts....which I still have trouble believing, but that's a debate for another time.....Now are you absolutely positive that the Order are outside right now?"

“Dumbledore said things that make me assume it, yeah. Why?”

“Because of the two groupings out there, the Order must be one of them.....now who is the other? The Ministry? Death Eaters? I’m thinking the Ministry, given that the two sides out there have to be aware of the other, and no attacks have been reported from around here.

“Tomorrow before I come here I’m going to go to Flourish and Blotts and buy some books for you, both on Occlumency and Defense. Don’t worry about the cost, I’ll just add it to your bill at the end, I make a nice living and can front the cost of a few books. Then starting next week I’m going to spend an hour a night teaching you Occlumency myself, all wizarding solicitors must demonstrate competence in it before we can get our licenses. This isn’t designed to protect you from Voldemort Harry, its designed to protect your plans from invasive and nosy Headmasters. I have an idea to get Snape out of here, but I’ll have to run it by your Aunt and Uncle, since it technically is their house. That, however, will only delay the inevitable, but it will give us an extra day or two.

“Ok, back to Fudge and how this whole thing got started. Harry, the reason we want Fudge still around for a few weeks is that one can work with Fudge. Contrary to what you may think, he can be reasoned with, and I’m not just talking about with money. I’m aware that Fudge isn’t the chairman of your fan club, but you are offering him two things that he greatly would benefit from: a breach between you and Dumbledore, and you leaving the country for at least two years. The first one alone is likely enough to get him on our side, since he will have to approve our petition to have you emancipated.....though that’s a grey area really, I’ve no doubt that all Ministry workers are instructed that anything dealing with your situation is to be sent to his office. Fudge doesn’t hate you Harry, he just sees you as a threat, even though I can’t see him still wanting to be Minister of Magic in 20 years when you’re eligible for it. He fears you and Dumbledore together, and he’s seen how Dumbledore has made you so loyal to him over the years. I’m half tempted to give your petition to him right away and skip the Ministry bureaucracy.

“Now, on to other matters: I saw in your file about an underage magic violation from four years ago, what’s that about?”

Harry and Dobby looked at each other and smiled, this was the first night that they had met after all. Harry told the story of how he and Dobby had first gotten together and the dropping of the pie. Dobby freely admitted that he did the deed, looking a bit sheepish that he had gotten Harry in trouble.

“Well that’s easily fixable, we’ll do that first thing when we go to the Ministry. Dobby, you’ll come along with us and tell Madam Bones your story, though that might not do it. Harry, you might have to be willing to take some veritaserum to confirm this, but I’ll make sure she doesn’t ask anything too risky or irrelevant.”

Harry and Dobby both nodded, that didn’t seem to bad.

“I’d better be going now Harry, I’ve been here over three hours it seems and your friends outside might scan us any minute and notice that there’re three more magical beings in here than there are supposed to. Do you have any questions for me?”

“One thing that you brought up earlier I’m curious about Peter, you said that our shields can’t stop bullets, can you explain that?”

“Sure Harry.....you see, our spells aren’t solid in their natural form, they are more or less concentrations of air with a lot of energy. That’s why Protego works against most spells, because its made of the same material. Bullets are solid, and they move at a speed our shields don’t recognize or can adapt to. There are advanced shields of course that can deflect solid objects and more powerful spells.....before you ask, no shield invented thus far can deflect Avada Kedavra or Cruciatus, and believe me, they’ve tried to come up with some.....anyway, those solid shields work more in the matter of muggle shields from the Middle Ages, like from the muggle movie Braveheart. None of those would stand up to bullets either.

“Harry, for 3,000 years wizards had the edge over muggles when it came to fighting, even as their population grew and ours barely did. You know that in 1900 there were only 2 billion muggles world-wide?

There were 900,000 wizards at that time, but we've increased only 10 percent and they've tripled. But 450 years ago, the gun was invented, and our advantage has been slipping away ever since."

"Why can't we use guns against Voldemort? Won't that kill him?"

"No Harry, guns won't work for one simple reason.....wizards have always held guns to be unacceptable for any reason whatsoever. Look at how muggles have butchered each other since the gun was invented. In World War II over 40 million people died Harry, and that's just one of their wars.....one of too many if you ask me. The industrial revolution has in some ways been the best thing ever to happen to muggles, but one day they're going to wipe themselves out."

Peter paused for a minute and tried think how he would frame this.

"We wizards seem very quaint at times, we don't use electricity mostly, we don't use automobiles or guns or anything that most muggles consider 'modern'. Muggle born and raised wizards and witches often have a hard time adjusting to wizard life because they don't have all their conveniences. With a few notable exceptions, we have changed very little in the thousand years since Hogwarts was founded and wizard life in Britain truly came together. One might think that wrong, since we're not evolving to meet the changing of the times, but we look at it as why should we mess around with what works?"

"Now you were asking why someone can't just take a .45, walk up behind our buddy Voldemort and pull the trigger.....because it crosses a line that wizards for the last 450 years have agreed not to cross. Even Voldemort himself has never used one, to my knowledge. The only wizard in recorded history to have crossed that line was Grindewald, and he rarely used one himself, and never on wizards. You see, Grindewald loved killing, and when he came to the height of his powers 70 years or so ago, there was relative peace in the wizarding world, so Grindewald insinuated himself in the muggle world. He saw that there was to be another large war coming , and he attached himself to a man that was very powerful and liked killing as much as he did. The muggle's name was Adolph Hitler, and

Grindewald was known in the muggle world as Heinrich Himmler. Together they were responsible for the deaths of over 25 million Jews and Russians. Oh Dumbledore stopped him eventually, I love how they called Himmler's death a 'suicide', only because muggles can't explain an Avada Kedavra death.

"What I'm trying to get across Harry, is that even for dark wizards there are rules, and Voldemort may not follow any rule but that one, but he does follow it. Now you or I, or anyone else could kill him with a gun, but we would automatically become pariahs in our world, the most wanted and hated person in the history of wizard culture. You'd be better off using the next bullet on yourself if you were to do that."

"Harry, this is a war between Voldemort and Dumbledore, its not much more than a muggle gang war. Dumbeldore and his Order of the Phoenix on one side, Voldemort and his Death Eaters on the other. Of the 20,000 wizards and witches in Britain, maybe 500 are directly involved one way or the other. 500 Harry, less than 3 percent of our population. Now most of the rest want Dumbledore to win mind you, I know I do, after all he was either our Transfiguration teacher or our Headmaster, he's touched all of our lives with his twinkling eyes and love of muggle candy. But ask yourself this Harry, why aren't more people getting involved? Because the pure-bloods only see this as a battle for the future of muggle borns in our world, that's Voledemort's whole platform.....and regrettably, most wizards don't see that as worth dying over.

Wow, this was unlike any history lesson Harry had ever sat through. "When you get those books tomorrow will you throw a couple of history books in with them? I want to learn more about this."

"Sure thing Harry, heaven knows Binns wouldn't have gotten that across very well. I honestly don't know how Dumbledore can preside over a staff meeting with a straight face: Lousy teachers in Potions, Defense, Divination, and History, it's a wonder that Britain's test scores aren't the worst in wizarding Europe."

"One thing I would like you to consider tonight Harry, I think you should let one of your friends in on what you're planning. Preferably they'd be in the Order or close to it, so that you could get a pulse of

what you're up against.....sorry, what WE are up against. I realize you don't know Bill that well, but I think he could help you a lot, as could Fred and George. Those guys know Dumbledore better than I do, and perhaps better than you do. You may think you would be getting them in trouble with Molly if she finds out, but those three more than the others are willing to stand up to her."

Harry smiled at that, too true he thought. He racked his brain to think of any other questions, but couldn't come up with any that couldn't wait a night to ask.

"Thanks Peter, I'll think about that, it might be a wise move. What time should I expect you tomorrow?"

"I'll make it at 2 pm if I can, when I leave I'll make sure with your aunt that they will both be

here."

"Oh yeah, how did you know that I had those 'minders', as you called them, out there?"

"I picked up on their magical signature with my scan. They could do the same here if they scanned your house. You said that Dobby and Winky have been here since yesterday and nothing has happened. I think they would notice two house-elves. They really are counting on that blood protection aren't they? The guards outside must be to keep you inside, not keep others out, since they've done a darn poor job in prevention. Have you left the house since you've been back?"

"No I haven't, I just figured that they wouldn't let me."

"Well no point in testing them out now. There is going to be a confrontation soon Harry, between you and Dumbledore, we need to have everything in place that we can before that happens. Figuratively we need to be able to pick the weapons and we sure as anything need to control the battlefield. I'm not exaggerating Harry, you know better than anyone about Dumbledore's obsession with keeping you safe, he's not going to take any of this lying down."

"I understand Peter, I'm ready to do what is necessary, short of killing Dumbledore of course."

"Well it won't come to that Harry, if he really believes you're this superweapon, he won't risk alienating you too much. The hardest part will be convincing him that you're serious and not just indulging in some childish whim, I need some time to think about that, how we're going to handle that."

"Meanwhile Harry, think about the things I asked you to, I'll see you tomorrow at 2 pm."

He reached out his hand and Harry shook it, he then surprised Harry by doing the same with Dobby and Winky. Peter walked downstairs and saw Petunia sitting in the living room.

"Mrs. Dursley, Harry and I have had a talk and I'm going to be representing him in some legal matters. I would like to talk with you and your husband tomorrow afternoon around 2:30 pm, will you both be home?"

"I believe we will, yes. What is this all about? Is the boy in any kind of trouble?"

"No ma'am he isn't, Harry is just interested in taking a bit more control over his affairs in our world. Believe me when I tell you Mrs. Dursley, you and your husband will like this conversation. Harry has told me of your hostility to our kind, and given your treatment by some of our people I don't especially blame you. This is designed to fix that Mrs. Dursley, we just need 30 minutes of your time tomorrow."

"I suppose that will be fine, I'll tell my husband when he gets home. Does Dudley need to be there as well?"

"Not necessarily Mrs. Dursley, but if he is here and you would like him to attend, Harry and I certainly have no objections. I must stress that what happens stays between the five of us, no matter what any white bearded wizard may tell you otherwise."

Petunia smiled faintly at this, finally a freak who had manners.....though in her heart of hearts she acknowledged that Harry was very polite as well, even if she never would admit it to Vernon.

“Ok Mr. Tyson, I can speak for my husband and I on that count.”

“Thank you Mrs. Dursley, I’ll see you tomorrow, have a nice evening.”

Without another word or gesture, Peter left the house and walked down Privet Drive, presumably to a secluded spot where he could apparate back to his office.

Harry returned to his room without looking at his aunt and shut the door. He took some time to digest what had happened that day, and all he had learned about himself. Harry mentally patted himself on the back for asking Mrs. Longbottom for her advice, his meeting with Peter Tyson could not have gotten better. Harry was aware that he had struck a cord with Tyson, but he still knew Tyson was doing what he thought practical. He also sensed some resentment of Dumbledore, perhaps some incident in the past. Maybe they had knocked heads at Hogwarts or something, he didn’t know.....and wasn’t sure if he wanted to ask. All he knew is that he had hired a professional advocate, someone who did this kind of thing for a living and would give him solid advice. This had been a good day.

Grimmaud Place, 6:30 pm

Remus sat at the dining room tables, lost in his own little world as Order of the Phoenix members filed in and sat down for their weekly meeting. Snape was still in Canada, but the rest of the core members were here: Dumbledore, McGonagall, Molly and Arthur, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, Hestia Jones, and many others, including Bill, Fred, and George Weasley. Molly hadn’t been happy with the twins joining the Order, but after they had not-so-subtly threatened to go Percy on her, she had relented. Remus couldn’t understand her frustration with the twins, surely grades didn’t matter to her that much? Gred and Forge, as they referred to themselves, were adamant that they wouldn’t return to Hogwarts for the last two months of their 7th year, they said they had no interest in NEWT scores or

dealing with any more rules than they had to. Their business was up and running quite well, Remus reminded himself to get a care package of WWW items to send to Harry for his birthday....or perhaps Harry would allow him to visit by then. His estrangement from Harry was puzzling to Remus, he had gotten the 'don't write me for awhile' letter Harry had sent out, and was worried about Harry being stuck there all alone with no one to talk with.

Dumbledore stood up, "Well my friends, lets get this meeting underway. Hestia, I believe you and Kingsley had guard duty today?"

"Yes we did, as usual not much happened. To our knowledge Harry has not left the house since he arrived from Kings Cross two weeks ago, his days of gardening appear to be over. Harry has sent his owl on an average of a delivery every other day. Lately the only owl other than Hedwig to appear there has been one that we now know to be Luna Lovegood's."

This raised some eyebrows among the Weasleys, who had been forced to listen to Ron go spare when Harry had asked to be left alone for a time, Harry had not written to anyone else since.

Shacklebolt continued the narrative, "There was one visitor today, we didn't recognize him and he was dressed in a very nice muggle suit. Petunia Dursley let him in the house right away and he stayed for about three hours, no screams or shouting going on, so he couldn't have been one of us. He's the only visitor that we've noticed in the last two weeks, other than several of Dudley Dursley's friends. Nothing unusual has gone on."

"Well good, young Mr. Potter appears to be developing a cautious streak. Who is on duty right now Tonks?"

"Moody and Dung, Moody won't let Dung do guard duty without him there to supervise him, he doesn't trust him after last summer."

Everyone in the room chuckled, Moody had been enraged at Fletcher's screwup last August and had to be talked out of killing the smuggler. Molly Weasley spoke up:

“When are you going to let him out of that awful place Albus? You know its not good for him to be there with those nasty people.”

“Sometime in mid-August Molly. We will remove him from Privet Drive and bring him here. He needs to be there at least a month this time, then we can take him out. Harry is safe where he is now, and he hasn’t written anything to me complaining. Severus is going to be going there next week to begin his Occlumency lessons again, he will observe things and find out if its necessary to remove him sooner.”

This caused consternation among the Weasleys, all of whom knew how much those 2 hated each other. Fred Weasley couldn’t restrain himself and burst out:

“Really Professor, does it have to be Snape? We all know how successful that was the last time you tried it.”

Molly initially looked as if she wanted to smack Fred for his tone of voice, then realized that she agreed with what he was saying. In fact the entire room agreed with Fred, Snape was easily the most unpopular person in the Order, and was only tolerated because Dumbledore insisted on it. They knew that Snape was spying on the Death Eaters, but he had been finding out little, as Voldemort was slow to trust Snape again.

“Professor Snape, Fred, is the best Occlumens we have available to teach Harry. He has assured me that he will strive harder to get his message across, and I believe him.”

Remus couldn’t take this any longer, and spoke up for the first time at an Order meeting since the death of Sirius Black:

“I want the record here to reflect my view that putting the two of them in the same room, with no supervision, is a recipe for disaster. One of two things will happen: either Harry, Snape, or both will be taking a fast trip to St. Mungo’s.....or Harry will be hauled in yet again before the Wizengamot for use of underage magic defending himself from your friend Snape and his neuroses. This is a mistake Albus, and I want you to remember what I just said so that next week you’ll be

quiet when I'm telling you 'I told you so' while we're cleaning up another Snape mess."

The room was dead silent as Remus and Dumbledore stared at one another. Pretty much everyone in the room agreed with what Remus had said, but they were not used to Dumbledore being challenged in such a way. Fred, George, and Bill Weasley couldn't (or wouldn't) stop the smiles of satisfaction from their faces.

"Be that as it may Remus, my decision stands. I am confident that both Severus and Harry can work together long enough to see this part through."

Remus didn't respond, much to the disappointment of the Weasley sons (whose collective eye-rolling was remarkably in sync), and the meeting went on for another 30 minutes, discussing more mundane matters. After it was over, Remus pulled Bill and the twins aside.

"Have any of you heard from Harry?"

"No we haven't," George replied, "He's been silent as the grave.....though we'd better not let Ron and Ginny know about Luna, they'll hex him into next week."

"I think she's good for him on the whole, I imagine she doesn't badger him with questions about his feelings and about the war," Bill noted. They all nodded. Fred and George had told the Order that they couldn't believe Luna of all people was handy in a Death Eater attack.....though they could have said the same thing about Neville as well.

"Bill, next time you're on guard duty (Fred and George had declined guard duty shifts because of the opening of their business) approach Harry and try to see what's going on with him. I got a letter from him yesterday and he wasn't too happy with me.....or any of us for that matter. Something about this bothers me guys, last summer was mad beyond belief because we left him alone, now he wants little to do with us."

"Are you worried that he might try something foolish?" Bill asked.

"Not exactly Bill, I just have a funny feeling that there's more going on there than meets the eye. I don't want Dumbledore to know about this, he and Harry are having some difficulties and that's where I think a lot of this is coming from, Harry just doesn't trust us anymore.....if he ever did."

"My next shift is tomorrow afternoon Remus, I'll look in on him then. It will be interesting to see those muggles I've heard so much about."

Fred and George grinned, and said in unison, "Say hi to Dudley for us!" Bill laughed, and added that he would bring some candy along with him this time. That brought a smile to Remus' face for the first time, and they parted, the twins to go back to their store, so they could send Ron home. Bill went off to his girlfriend's place, Remus went upstairs for a nap, the full moon three days earlier had still tired him.

Saturday, July 21, 1996

Privet Drive, 2:00 pm

Vernon Dursley sat in his kitchen chair, eating his lunch and wondering what the heck was happening. He had returned home yesterday to his normal house and his normal life, other than his freak nephew. He was astounded when Petunia had told him about Peter Tyson's visit and what was to happen today. His first instinct was to say no, no freak was going to tell him what to do, but one thing stuck in his mind 'you will like this conversation'. That gave Vernon pause, those freaks knew that the only way he would like the conversation was if it meant getting Potter out of here forever.....surely they couldn't mean that? Not that Vernon didn't dearly wish for that, but he knew that Dumbledore wasn't big on respecting his wishes. Vernon wasn't so dumb that he wasn't aware that most of his hate of Harry came from habit, after all the kid was such a quiet little thing, didn't eat much, and from what Petunia said hadn't even left the house since he got back from that place. He had always known deep down that he couldn't stamp the magic out of Harry, and he did (even deeper down) dread what Harry might do to him when he was allowed to use that stick of his.....maybe this would be an out for him

there. He sighed and decided to just find out when he found out, the freak was supposed to be here in 30 minutes, he could wait that long.

The doorbell rang. Petunia went to answer it, wondering if it was that wizard here early. It was:

“Hello Mrs. Dursley, lovely to see you again.”

Out in the yard, under an invisibility cloak, Bill Weasley was thunderstruck, was this who he thought it was? He remembered Tonks’ description of yesterday’s visitor, and this matched it, but his eyes must be playing tricks. He hadn’t seen Peter in about a year, though they continued to exchange their monthly owls, catching each other up. Bill had only been permanently living in London for a month now, and he, Peter and his wife were due to have dinner the next night. He reacted as quickly as he could when he saw Peter disappear inside.

The doorbell rang again, 10 seconds after Tyson had walked through the door and was saying hello to Vernon Dursley.

“I know you, you’re one of those Weasleys from the train station.”

“Yes Mrs. Dursley, I’m Bill, may I come in?” He didn’t wait for a reply and walked in.....”Peter, what on earth are you doing here?”

Harry went pale and Peter didn’t look much better, Vernon and Petunia just looked confused. They had never met Bill before and Vernon was still getting used to the idea of Peter looking so normal for a wizard.

“I could ask you the same Bill, its good to see you,” Peter replied, deciding to keep Bill off balance. The 2 approached each other and shook hands warmly. The two shared wary smiles, Bill was slowly realizing what was going on here, while Peter knew exactly what Bill was doing there, he was Harry’s guard dog for the afternoon. He turned to Vernon and Petunia:

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley I apologize for the confusion, I’m aware I said 2:30 and I’m early, but I wanted to confirm a few things with Harry in

private before we talked, so I told him I would be here at 2 pm. If you would be kind enough to give us some time to talk we'll be back down here at the appointed time. I stress again to you both: You will like this conversation. Will your son be joining us?" He hadn't seen Dudley yet and was admittedly curious after hearing Harry describe him.

"Yes he will Mr. Tyson, after what happened last summer we feel he has a right to know what's going on."

"That's fine Mrs. Dursley, I happen to agree with you completely on that. If you will excuse us, Harry, Bill and I will go upstairs and have our meeting. We will be back down soon. Our talk with you won't take too long, so any evening plans you have will not be interrupted."

Petunia and Vernon looked at each other and nodded to Peter, the wizards proceeded up the stairs and into Harry's room.

Peter made sure to let Bill go in before him and made a quick move to grab Bill's wand, and before Bill knew what happened, Peter was holding on to it. Harry closed the door behind them all and Peter reinforced Dobby's silencing charm on the room.

"Ok Peter, what the bloody hell is going on here? You were the guy here yesterday weren't you?"

"Yes I was Bill, I see there must have been an Order meeting yesterday, your colleagues took note of me?"

"Yes they did, though they pegged you for a muggle visitor, they had no idea you were here to see Harry."

Peter looked at Harry and said, "Well Harry, have you thought about what we talked about, letting one of them on the inside? Now is the time to decide."

Harry had thought about it all last night, what to do about telling a friend. Again, he had gone over the list of his friends in his mind, and boiled them down to five that he could dare confide in: Fred, George, Luna, Neville, and Bill.....Bill only because he and Peter were friends

(Charlie is still in Romania at this time) and Harry had liked how cool he was. He looked at the two of them and decided:

“Yes Peter, we can tell him.....as long as we have his word that he won't tell anyone that we don't want him to.”

“Well Bill, is what we tell you going to stay between us? I don't want to have to threaten you, but you can't tell Dumbledore or his minions about this at all. I assure you its nothing heinous or illegal, in fact Harry is bending over backward to keep it legal. Its your choice Bill, we want you on our side.”

Bill wasn't as torn as one might think, Fred and George had been working on him ever since summer ended and he was becoming quite the Harry partisan. He had been appalled while listening to the twins describe how Harry was treated here, and was more than willing to get him out of here if that's what was going on.

“Ok, you've got my word, I'm on your side and I won't tell anyone that you disapprove of.....but I want the twins to be let in on this Harry, you don't know this but they're your biggest advocates in the Order.....plus you're their business partner, they will always stick with you.”

“That's fine Bill, but I want to be the one to tell them, not you, we'll set this up as soon as possible with them, and Luna and Neville too, I want their help as well.”

Bill noted the names Harry mentioned, and couldn't help but notice the absence of some significant ones.

“What about Ron and Hermione? What happened between you three?”

“Its complicated Bill, I'll explain it all to you I promise, but they can't know anything until its done and settled.”

“Fair enough, you've got my curiosity aroused completely, what's going on?”

"I'm leaving Britain Bill, I'm dealing myself out of this war."

"Ok, of all the things you could have told me Harry, that was the one I wasn't expecting. Is this for real?"

"Do you see me smiling Bill? This is no joke."

Bill looked at the faces around him and indeed no one was smiling. He closed his eyes and silently cursed Dumbledore for putting them all in this situation. He had no doubt that the old man had dropped some kind of bomb on Harry at the end of the term that put him in the mind-set, he and the twins had speculated on it but couldn't come up with anything definitive.

"What happened Harry? What changed you? Peter, what do you have to do with this?"

Peter and Harry looked at each other, expecting the other to speak first. Peter nodded at Harry and he began:

"I'm 15 years old Bill, and in the last year I've watched two friends die, one of whom was also my godfather. I've been the most hated person in our world; been possessed by Voldemort; had a blood quill used on me by some psychopath who had official permission to torture me; and oh yeah, I was banned, along with your brothers, from Quidditch for defending your mother from the slandering of a Death Eater in training.....all of this happened in the last 13 months Bill, that is what has changed." Harry's voice had grown more and more hateful as he spoke, chilling Bill with its tone.

"Why would I want to stay in a school, in a society that would allow ANY of that to happen, let alone all of it? I might consider staying in Britain if I didn't have to return to Hogwarts Bill, but I've been incredibly lucky to survive my five years there and I'm not sure I want to press my luck. I didn't ask for any of this fame crap, and I'm no longer willing to suffer under its burdens.....seeing as how I don't see any benefits coming from it."

"Harry, what did Dumbledore lay on you in his office?"

Harry's and Peter's jaws dropped as they stared open mouthed at Bill. How did he know about that? What the heck happened? Harry reacted first, with a rage Bill had never seen before in the brief time he'd known him.

"How on earth did you know about that? What has that \$& told the Order!"

"Easy Harry, we don't want any accidental magic to happen, I'd rather not be blown up like your Aunt Marge."

Talk about the wrong thing to say, Peter had to physically restrain Harry from punching Bill for that one. He rolled his eyes at his friend and commented:

"Save the witty repartee for your witch of the moment Bill, let's not provoke things we don't have to provoke ok?"

"I'm sorry Harry, that was poorly timed, forgive me?" Bill hit him with that Weasley grin of his, and Harry couldn't help but smile back and nod his head.

"His language aside, Harry asked very relevant questions Bill, what do you know and how do you know it?"

"First of all guys, Dumbledore hasn't said much of anything to us about regarding you Harry. We've only had the two Order meetings since the Department of Mysteries and pretty much all that gets said about you are reports from the watchers outside; and when he told us that Snape was coming here next week for Occlumency. You should know that no one in my family is especially happy about that Harry, and individually we've told Dumbledore as much. Ron is who told me Harry, he was in the hospital when you got back from Dumbledore's office, but Seamus and Dean noticed that you seemed quite upset. They told Ron the next day when he got back to the dorm. He and Hermione watched you pretty carefully and agreed that you seemed as much angry as you were sad. Sad they could understand, having watched what happened to Sirius.....angry was what they couldn't understand, they didn't think that Sirius' death was something that you would be angry about. Ron told the twins when he got home, and

they told me. Fred, George and I have been pooling our information about you lately, we're on your side Harry, and I have no doubt that if Charlie was here he would be as well, I can speak for him."

"I don't know what to say Bill.....I never realized that Ron was so observant."

"Oh c'mon Harry, think about what you just said. Ron is the one person who should know you the best, he's been your best mate for five years. I think you owe him a little better than that, and that doesn't even touch on how you've been ignoring him the last two weeks."

"He ignored me most of last summer Bill.....and before you say it, I know he was doing it on Dumbledore's orders, but he still could have found a way to owl me if he had wanted to."

"Is that what your silence to him is about Harry? Payback?"

"No Bill, its not payback.....well not merely payback. Answer me this: if push came to shove Bill, and Ron had to support me, or support the combined efforts of Hermione, your parents, and Dumbledore, who would he choose?"

Bill considered this for a moment, he had never thought of the problem framed as Harry had framed it.

"I don't know Harry, I never thought about it like that. Is that really how you see it, all of those people, my parents even, lined up against you?"

"Answer my question first Bill, then I'll tell you what I'm thinking, and why."

"Since you put it that way Harry, I don't know who Ron would side with.....that's a lot on the

'other side' that would be swaying him, but I know how much he cares about you."

“That’s the problem Bill, I don’t know who he would side with either, and until I do, I just can’t share my plans with him. Heck, if push came to shove I don’t know whether he would pick me over just Hermione, let alone everyone else. I wouldn’t be a bit shocked if those two are a couple by now and just haven’t told me yet. You and I both know that if I try to leave Britain, legally or illegally, Dumbledore is going to try to stop me, by any means at his disposal. Your mother and father are very closely allied with Dumbledore, your family is a very old, pureblood family, one of the few openly on his side. Your mother, bless her heart and I love her to pieces, would agree that I belong here, no matter what my wishes would be. And your father Bill, he would do what she said, I know how it is in your family.”

Bill chuckled at that, of all the Weasley children he was probably the closest to his father, partly from having come first, partly from the fact that Bill looked at his father and saw his humanity, and how it attracted people. Arthur Weasley was not the most ambitious wizard in their society, but he was one of the most liked and well thought of...but Bill acknowledged the truth in what Harry said:

“You’re right Harry, I guess I’ve never thought about it that way. In your place I would be a little cautious around Ron as well. Why are you putting Hermione so solidly in Dumbledore’s camp? Do you really think she’s against you?”

“It’s not so much that she’s against me Bill, in fact I’m sure she’s not yet, but its that she’s so much for Dumbledore. You’re not around her on a daily basis, she thinks the man walks on water. She’s read Hogwarts a History too many times I suppose. Over the years Ron and I have loosened her up to the point that she’ll break rules.....but none that Dumbledore lays down. Our first year and the ‘no going up on the 3rd floor corridor or you will suffer a most painful death’, she only violated that by accident, and when something had to be done and Dumbledore wasn’t around to tell. That’s the only time she’s come close Bill, and I know that if Dumbledore told her to draw her wand on me, for my own good he’d say of course.....she’d do it.”

He showed Bill and Peter the two letters he’d gotten from Hermione, badgering him for information on what he was feeling and if his scar had hurt. They looked at each other and nodded, it certainly looked

like Harry at least had justification for thinking that way, even if Bill didn't want to believe it.

"I see your point Harry, I do. I'd like your acquiescence to at least sound out Ron....only in the vaguest of terms at first, but at least let me try."

Harry sighed, Bill had tugged on his heart strings in a most able way. Harry didn't want to keep Ron out of the loop, and he knew that the consequences for their friendship would be terrible if Ron learned about the plan after the fact. He had to at least try.

"Ok Bill, I'll leave it to your judgment on that.....but I want you to be prepared to use a memory charm if you have to, if it looks like Ron will betray us. Oh, and find out for me if those two are a couple will you."

"Fair enough Harry, I'll do that for you.....now no more delaying, I want to know what Dumbledore told you, what made you so angry with and distrustful of him."

Harry girded himself, and told Bill the Prophecy. Bill listened to it with horrified fascination, putting his head in his hands as he heard the last of it.

"I suppose its way to much to hope that you made that up just to amuse yourself?"

The others smiled, Harry could understand why people responded to Bill, he had a way of making things less tense. He shook his head in the negative, as Bill looked up.

"So this is why it has been so important to protect you all these years? Dumbledore believes you're the final weapon against Voldemort?"

"Yep, in a nutshell that's it. I'm stuck here, under the blood protection of my aunt, so that no Death Eater or Voldemort himself can harm me. The old man has gotten a bit sloppy at school though, given how many times I've almost been killed there. I'm not sure I believe in the

Prophecy Bill, but I appear to be the only major player who feels that way.”

“Well it explains a lot, that’s for certain. Is that why you want to leave?”

“I want to leave Bill, because I don’t trust any of the people who’ve been making decisions on my behalf. I also would prefer to go to a school where I’m not famous and the epicenter of everything that happens. In other words, I want to be a normal teenager for a couple of years. If the war is still going on when I’m done with school.....well I might be open to cooperating with the Order, though I will never join it as long as Dumbledore is leading it, and I mean NEVER.”

Bill sighed again, he was getting good at that particular emotion. Between Ron and the twins,

Bill had a pretty good idea of Harry’s adventures and sufferings over the years, and he had witnessed firsthand the aftermath of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He didn’t really blame the kid for wanting out of something he’d never signed up for in the first place.

“Ok Harry, that doesn’t change what I said before: I’m with you. What’s the plan?”

Harry looked at Peter, who took a shrunken bag out of his pocket and enlarged it.

“Here are those books I promised you Harry, there are 10 total: Five of them are on advanced Defense, including an Auror training manual from three years ago; Two are on history, like you asked for, they detail most of our wars and many of our great wizards and witches; Two are on Occlumency, those I want you to start first; The last one is a career handbook, you need to figure out what to do with your life once school ends. I know you have enough money that you don’t have to work, but you need to fill your days with something. I’m coming here for your Occlumency lesson at 5 pm on Monday, that gives you 50 hours to memorize those books. Looking around here it doesn’t appear as if you have much else to do, and the books aren’t that thick, maybe 400 pages between them. I want you to at least

know the principles and theories behind it before we have your first lesson.”

“Ok, next phase: what to do about Snape. How much do you hate Snape Harry?”

“More than anyone in the world not named Voldemort. I hate him even more than Bellatrix LeStrange or my relatives.”

“Well that’s certainly definitive isn’t it. The plan I have in mind is to send our friend Dumbledore a note next week, probably Thursday, saying that Snape isn’t welcome here. We’ll get you and your Aunt and Uncle to sign it, something tells me they won’t be averse to the idea of banning a particular wizard from their home.”

“Dumbledore and Snape won’t care about that Peter, they’ll simply ignore it like they do every other Dursley complaint,” Harry pointed out. Peter grinned broadly:

“That’s the point Harry, Snape will come here in direct violation of the wishes of the owners of the house.....even in our world Harry, that’s against the law.”

Harry and Bill looked at each other with slight confusion, they knew this was going somewhere fun, but couldn’t quite tell where. Peter put them out of their misery.

“As soon as Snape shows up, alone I’m going to assume, we send one of your elves, with a pre-prepared note, straight to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The head of that department is one Amelia Bones, who is, if I’m not mistaken Bill, not an Order of the Phoenix member.”

Bill nodded, and Peter went on:

“The note will say, in so many words, that Snape is there against everyone’s wishes but his, and is threatening you with his wand, whilst knowing that you’re not allowed to use yours. I daresay you won’t have to do much to elicit this threat Harry, but goad him if you need to. With any luck he’ll try to curse you right as the Aurors show

up to investigate, we can't be having the 'Boy Who Lived' assaulted in his own home, by a Hogwarts Professor no less."

Bill and Harry burst out laughing as Peter sat back looking very satisfied with himself. Harry was the first to catch his breath.

"Oh that is so very, very, very cruel Peter.....I love it. Are you sure you weren't a Slytherin?"

Peter grinned and shook his head in the negative. Bill was next:

"You really think we can pull that off? I mean, you have Snape pegged pretty well, I have no trouble believing that he would do everything you described.....but what if the DMLE doesn't respond as quickly as you think, or respond at all? After all, the Aurors on duty might include Tonks or Kingsley."

"That's why we're going to have a backup plan Bill.....us. Early next week I'm going to file a petition with the Ministry of Magic to have Harry legally emancipated. Ideally I'm going to have the hearing as close to Snape's visit as possible, so that they don't have advance warning and a chance to interfere. Snape being arrested will be a very demonstrative way of showing that Harry isn't safe at Hogwarts, when one of its professors, Dumbledore's pet, has attacked him in front of his muggle family. We might even arrange for The Daily Prophet and The Quibbler to get some photos, taken on the sly of course. Harry will feed his friend Luna's father an exclusive recount of the events, and chaos will ensue, making our young friend here a martyr for the abuses at our beloved alma mater."

Bill was awestruck at how well thought out this plan seemed to be, except for one thing:

"What do you mean 'us'?"

"I mean that if the Aurors don't respond like we want them to, you and I will have to step in. Snape is capable of harming Harry you know, and he would have a good time doing it too. Harry's dueling skills are already minor legend, but Snape is an expert. So we can't allow him to incapacitate Harry and start in with the Occlumency, he'd find out

our plans easily enough and run off to his mentor and start blabbing. Plus there's the real possibility that Snape might be working for the other side. Harry told me that he wouldn't put it past Snape to kidnap him and deliver him to Voldemort, such a feat would put him above all other Death Eaters, he'd be set for life if he wished. Dumbledore might be insane enough to allow Snape to be alone with Harry, that doesn't mean we have to let him. I have every confidence that Snape is a good duelist, but I don't see him taking out both you and I at the same time Bill, assuming he can even take Harry."

"So you're saying I can respond to his attacks?" Harry got an immediate dreamy look on his face after saying that.

"Only if we get you emancipated first, and only if Snape attacks first. Without the emancipation Dumbledore can twist things until your house arrest here, which this more or less is, becomes legal and binding.....and without Snape attacking first, well then you could be tried for assault, which would not look good on your applications to other wizarding schools."

"I understand Peter."

"I knew you would, now Harry, on Monday when I get to the office I'm going to send some owls to various schools in America. I want permission from you to ask my wife about this, she has relatives over there that can better tell us about the benefits of the various schools, and hopefully if any of the heads of the schools have any problems with Dumbledore. All I really know is that there are four wizarding equivalents of Hogwarts in the United States, plus another in Canada.....speaking of which, I noticed that you have a vault in Toronto, do you know anything about that?"

"I have no idea Peter, it's the first I've ever heard of it. I know nothing really about my family histories, though I have to assume that it's a Potter vault, not an Evans one. And yes, you can tell your wife about it, I'd figured that you had already."

"No I didn't Harry, I take my professional word very seriously, though I did tell her that I've taken you on as a client of course. She asked me what you were like as person, though not about the case, she knows

enough not to. She remembered your mother, from when she taught at Hogwarts, my wife was a Hufflepuff in Bill's year, one ahead of mine. Do you remember Lily Potter, Bill?"

"Yes I do.....in fact I remember when she was pregnant with you Harry. Kids would come up to her and pat her belly (Bill smiled in remembrance), we weren't used to having a teacher at Hogwarts young enough to be pregnant. I was in my first year and I was in awe of her, wife of a famous Quidditch star, teacher at Hogwarts, and only 20 years old, it was amazing to us. I never got a chance to have her as a teacher Harry, I was a 3rd year when she went into hiding and soon thereafter was killed. Runes was my specialty and I would have gotten to know her pretty well.....and you too I guess, had she lived, had none of this mess ever happened." Bill's eyes misted up, as did Harry's. Bill continued:

"Peter, do you remember the night Harry defeated Voldemort? I can still see it, like it just happened. Professor Flitwick made the announcement at the Halloween feast "Voldemort has been defeated! Harry Potter has destroyed the Dark Lord!" The entire hall went into a massive cheer, even most of the Slytherins looked happy. We all hugged each other and threw pumpkin juice up in the air. I found Charlie, he was a first year then, and he was so happy that he was crying.....and Harry, this was a kid who never cried for any reason. Flitwick didn't give us any details of what happened and we didn't care, the celebration went on through the night, the professors just sat there in a daze and didn't bother trying to send us to our beds. The next morning at breakfast we found out the reason for that daze, as Dumbledore explained to us what happened, and why one of our most popular teachers and her husband were never coming back. As loud as the hall had been the night before Harry, that's how silent it was after he told us. Gryffindor House went into mourning, and it lasted all year. We didn't care about Quidditch or House Cups or any of that bother. Our icons were dead and our little brother orphaned, it was a large price to pay to get rid of Voldemort Harry.....I have to wonder if some of the disbelief this past year that he was back stems from that, such a high price paid, and ultimately for nothing, just for a delay."

“Bill, why is it that no one else will talk to me the way you two do? I’ve learned more about my parents and about our world in the last two days than from five years of conversations with Remus, Sirius, Hagrid, Dumbledore and all the rest, even your parents.”

“I don’t know Harry, I wish I did. Maybe it’s just bad luck, maybe the others have been under some kind of instruction from Dumbledore to mushroom you, I don’t know. I know my parents think of you like another son and only want to protect you.....but now that I’ve listened to you, I don’t know if that’s what you’ve needed. I know that Sirius and Remus were/are very dependant on the old man for their survival, it wouldn’t take much to keep them quiet. They could always rationalize by thinking they could tell you when you grew up.”

Peter looked at his watch, it was almost 2:30 pm.

“Ok, we can’t afford to keep your relatives waiting much longer Harry, we need to wrap this up. Bill, when is your next guard shift after today?”

“Monday night, starting at 6 pm I think.”

“Perfect, I’ll still be here and we can finalize our plans. I want you to tell Fred and George to get over here as well, have them close the shop early if need be. Harry, if you want your friends Luna and Neville to be in on this, I suggest you owl them tomorrow and have them take the Knight Bus over here. Bill only bring Ron if you’re positive about him, and I mean dead positive, we don’t want to have to Obliviate him if we don’t have to. Your OWL results should have arrived by then, so we’ll know better what your options are. Make sure that Luna and Neville don’t get here before the shift change to Bill, we don’t know if Dumbledore will allow you visitors or not and I would prefer not to find out if we don’t have to. Everyone clear?”

Bill and Harry looked at each other, nodded, and snapped off identical military salutes, in unison they cried:

“Yes sir!”

Everyone in the room dissolved into laughter as they left the room and headed downstairs. They saw Harry's relatives in the living room and entered it, Peter spoke up:

"Ok Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, let's get started. Is Dudley going to join us?"

Before they could answer Dudley came in from the kitchen, he flinched when he saw Bill's red hair, memories of the Ton Tongue Toffee coming back to him, but he rallied and approached Peter with his hand outstretched. They shook, and he did the same with Bill.

"Good to meet you Dudley, I'm Peter Tyson, Harry's solicitor, this is Bill Weasley, a friend of Harry's. You must be wondering what this is all about, its simple: This is about getting Harry out of here and him never coming back.....ever."

Vernon and Petunia looked at each other very hopefully, they had discussed this possibility the night before, but couldn't believe that it would be that easy. If there was one thing that they had learned in their dealings with the wizarding world: What they wanted didn't matter one bit. Vernon made the first Dursley sally into the conversation:

"Just how are you going to do that? That old man ordered us to keep him here."

"We're going to do this the old-fashioned way Mr. Dursley, we're going to do it legally. We are going to file a petition with your Child Social Services agency, hopefully obtain a positive ruling, then do the same in our world, and then Harry will be free, and I have no doubt that once he's free he will elect to move out, as he has made us aware that you and he aren't the closest."

Vernon had to smile at that one, he looked over at Harry and decided that the kid wasn't as dumb as he'd thought, he'd either planned this out very well, or found someone who could. He still thought it sounded too easy though:

"Is that all? You really think it will go that smoothly? What about that Dumbledore fellow, won't he object?"

"Oh he most certainly will. I feel though, that a combination of legal tactics and not so judicious threats will either bring him in line, or we'll prevail in spite of him."

"This still sounds too good to be true.....what do you want from us?"

"Just to sign your name to a few pieces of paper, and put up with having a few wizards visiting your home for the next week or two."

"How is the boy paying you? We don't give him any allowance to pay for solicitors."

"Harry will work it off by volunteering in my office next summer, I have a lot of little things around there that I could use some help with, he'll pay my bill that way."

Harry admired the smooth way Peter had come up with that, and tried to look as though this wasn't news to him. Vernon wasn't even looking at him, he was lost in thought as he contemplated what he'd heard. Petunia spoke up:

"Won't the boy be in danger if he doesn't come back next summer? That's what Dumbledore has been saying all of these years."

"Well yes, Mrs. Dursley, Harry will be in greater danger.....but he is prepared to accept that as part and parcel of the deal. Let me assure you Harry isn't simply doing this to sever ties with you, he has some issues in our world that make him need to have more legal say than he has. That said, you have made him fully aware of your aversion to anything 'wizardry', and he is willing to respect your wishes by leaving.....going through these proceedings will allow him to. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, you must have realized by now that whenever Harry becomes of age, be it next year in our world, 1998 in yours.....Dumbledore will keep putting him here for whatever time is needed to renew these blood protections.....in spite of the fact that everyone in this house wishes otherwise." Vernon nodded at the logic

of that statement, he'd been dreading that same thing for years, ever since Harry had gone to Hogwarts."

"You're right Mr. Tyson.....but what are you going to do to protect us from Dumbledore if we let Harry do as he wants? He'll blame us somehow for the boy's doings."

"Mr. Dursley you raise an excellent point, and I'll tell you this: he won't do a thing, he can't. If it got out that he had harmed you in any way he'd be finished. Now I'm not going to lie to you Mr. Dursley, this might not work, we might not get Harry emancipated, there are no guarantees in this process. That said, we are going to try, and like I said, all we need from you is a few signatures when the time comes. With any luck, this will all be settled by Harry's birthday on the 31st."

Petunia and Vernon looked at each other again, what did they have to lose? If it failed it simply meant a continuation of the status quo, if it succeeded.....happiness, with no wizards around them forever. Vernon looked at Harry:

"Ok Harry, I know that you and I rarely agree on anything.....but we agree on this. We'll sign what we have to in order to make this happen.....I promise."

Harry stood up and approached Vernon Dursley, the bane of his existence for years. He steeled himself and reached out his hand to Vernon.....with a blank look on his face Vernon shook it. They were in this as a family, hopefully the last thing they did as a family together. Peter and Bill both looked outside to see if it was raining frogs or something, but sadly it wasn't. Peter took a couple of pieces of paper out of his briefcase and handed them to Vernon.

"This is a boilerplate emancipation request that I've had typed up.....yes we use typewriters in our world Mrs. Dursley.....it's not a bad piece of fiction, if I do say so myself, and I'm betting that it will be convincing enough to the civil servant who has to rule on it. You four will need to appear in some sort of hearing, but that will at most take an hour. You just need to pretend for one hour that you get along decently, but that there's been enough friction between you to merit a favorable decision. In broad strokes we'll tell them the truth,

that Harry is going away to boarding school, and that he doesn't want to rely on the phones and mail to execute his decisions. I need you both to sign this paper so that we can get the process started. I have some contacts in the Social Services office and we can expedite this and do it this week."

Vernon couldn't sign fast enough, and Petunia followed suit after a slight, but noticeable hesitation. Harry then put his own signature on the document, and at Dudley's curious look, passed it over to him so he could read it. His eyebrows rose a few times as he read Tyson's fiction, but he made no comment out loud. Bill and Peter took their leaves soon after, walking out with Dudley (on his way to work). Harry immediately went upstairs to begin his reading, while Petunia and Vernon just sat there staring at each other.

Monday, July 23, 1996

Privet Drive 4:30 pm

Harry laid on his bed and re-read his Occlumency notes for what seemed like the 20th time. The books that Peter had given him, *A Beginner's Guide to Organizing Your Mind*, and *Advanced Theories of Occlumency*, had been very helpful, and Harry had taken over 20 pages of notes in the muggle-style notebook that Aunt Petunia had given him. More than once Harry had had a 'light bulb' moment when reading these books, and not for the first time cursed that numb-wit Snape and his "Clear your mind Potter" crap.

It turns out that Occlumency is not about clearing the mind at all, it involves setting up defenses and barriers, for the twin purpose of: keeping memories tucked away; and more easily forcing intruders from the mind. It was much like a muggle alarm system Harry realized, involving detection, protection, and eviction. All clearing your mind did was allow the intruder to stick around longer, without fear of penalty and give them time to find what they're looking for. Harry wondered if Snape's way of 'teaching' was really how he had learned, he would have to run this by Peter when he arrived, the 'Snape as triple agent' theory that the two had been bouncing around was gaining more and more credence.

The day before, Harry had sent Hedwig on her rounds, with letters to Luna and Neville, asking them to show up today at 6:30 pm:

Dear Luna/Neville,

Hi there, how are things going? I'm having a small get-together at my relatives house tomorrow at 6:30 pm. I have some thing that I'm working on and I would like your input and advice. The best way I can think of to get here is to take The Knight Bus and say you need to go to Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey. They've picked me up here once before, so it shouldn't be a bother. I'm also inviting Neville/Luna, so hopefully you'll see them on the bus as well.

I must ask you this though, please keep this invitation to yourself. I know that you likely will have to tell your father/grandmother, but please no one else. I'm not sure if my wizard jailers here will allow me visitors, but I have that part arranged, as long as no one on the outside finds out. The meeting shouldn't last too long, afterward we sit around and catch-up, it will be good to see you again.

If you're in, just do nothing and send Hedwig along to her next stop. If you can't make it, write me a note saying so and give it Hedwig and we'll figure something out for another time.

See you soon,

Harry

PS: Neville, our OWL results should be there by the time you come by, bring yours and we can compare, hopefully we did pretty well.

Hedwig had returned from her Ottery St. Catchpole to Brighton (where Neville lived) to Surrey run in short order, with no notes attached to her, so Harry assumed that everything was a go. His own OWL results hadn't come yet, which was putting on edge a bit. Even if he didn't return to Hogwarts.....if, because he hadn't missed Peter's caution to the Dursleys that this scheme might not work.....he would need good grades to get into whatever school in North America that he wanted to go to.

Harry had also written short letters to Ron and Hermione, telling them in vague terms that he was having a decent summer. He hadn't mentioned a whiff of his plans, and had resisted temptation to throw a false bone at Hermione, to try and smoke her out. He had talked about how there had been no Voldemort visions, that he and the Dursleys were engaged in a form of *détente* (though not why), and that he had come to grips with what had happened to Sirius.....all of which was true, more or less. Harry rationalized that he wasn't exactly lying to his closest friends, he was just telling them only certain true things. He had seen on a muggle American cop show, how they make you tell 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth', but in reality the truth and nothing but the truth, but not the whole truth might sound like a lie, but really wasn't. He knew that Ron and Hermione would not appreciate that kind of hair-splitting, but he decided to kick that can when he came to it.

Tap, Tap, Tap

Harry looked up at the slight noise, there was someone at the door. He went up to open it and saw Dudley there.

"Hey Dudley, no work today?" Dudley's job at the cinema had become a all consuming thing, so much so that Harry wondered if there was a particular girl there that Duds was interested in. He'd been putting in over 50 hours per week there since he'd returned home (muggle schools letting out two weeks before Hogwarts in most years), in addition to all of the free movies that he was watching. Harry himself was itching to see Independence Day, after seeing posters all over King's Cross when he had returned from school.

"No, not today. I usually take one day off a week and its been Mondays, since it's the time when we're the least busy."

Harry looked at Dudley a bit more closely. He had lost quite a bit of weight over the last 2 years, and while no one would call him thin, he could (with baggy clothes) be thought of as simply husky. There was also a calmness to his cousin that he hadn't noticed before. Usually Dudley sneered at him, when he bothered to look at him at all. Now though, Dudley was looking at him with curiosity, as if he too was seeing his cousin for the first time, or in a new light.

“What’s on your mind Dudley?”

“Are you really leaving next week? Forever?” To Harry’s great surprise, his cousin didn’t look gleeful at the prospect, if anything he looked a bit concerned.

“If everything works out as we hope to, yes. I’ll be gone sometime in the middle of next week. We’re doing our court petition at the end of this week like Peter mentioned Saturday.....after that is when the fireworks are going to start.”

“I heard Mom and Dad talking yesterday....they’re worried about you Harry, they think that bad wizard your lot are so worried about are going to get you now, since you won’t be here.”

Harry had never been more flabbergasted in his life, so much so that he couldn’t help the words that came out of his mouth next:

“What do they care? I would have thought that they’d be happy about that.”

Dudley looked at him like he was about to unload on him for saying that, but his face changed and he didn’t.

“I guess I don’t blame you for thinking that Harry, I know none of us have been very nice to you over the years. I mean, no matter what may have gone on between all of us.....none of us want you dead. After all this time would it make a difference if I said I’m sorry? The brutal truth is that while I’m sorry now Harry, I can’t really say I was sorry then.”

“It wouldn’t make a difference in me wanting to leave Dud, but it would be nice to hear if you really mean it.”

“Then I’m sorry Harry.....I never knew you were a wizard until that giant man came and told us, I just knew that Mom hated your mom and dad. I don’t think Dad even met them more than a few times, but he didn’t like them for some reason.....a reason that I found out when you did, like I said. I saw pretty early on that the meaner I was

to you, the better things would be for me. Anytime I wanted something new all I had to do was do something to you and I would get it. Maybe deep down I knew that what I was doing was wrong, but it was pretty deep.” Dudley sighed and continued:

“Part of it might also have been that I was afraid that Mom and Dad would turn on me too if I was nice to you, they weren’t going to like you no matter how close you and I were. I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m telling you all of this now. You probably think that it doesn’t mean much now, since you’re leaving, and maybe it doesn’t.....but every time I think about last summer, and I think about it everyday, I remember that you saved my life, or my soul, or whatever those Dementor things take. The irony of the whole thing, and that meeting the other day made me think of this, is that if you’d let them get me....you’d have been out of here forever just like you’re wanting. Mom and Dad never would let you come back, no matter what your school guy said.”

Harry was at a loss for words, the thought behind the words aside, Harry had had no idea that Dudley was this articulate. He knew Smeltings was a good school, some of it must have rubbed off. Harry smiled:

“You’ve been practicing that speech haven’t you?” Dudley laughed:

“A bit yeah, but I meant it. I’m not that good at speeches, I didn’t do so well in my Speech and Communications class at Smeltings, but I did learn a lot in it. Speaking of speaking (they both snickered), you know this is probably the longest conversation we’ve ever had?”

“And it only took 15 years.....well, 14 after we learned to talk.”

The doorbell rang, both of them knew it was Peter coming for Harry’s Occlumency lesson. Dudley made to leave Harry’s room.

“Let’s hope that it doesn’t take another 14 years to have another one.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean Dud.....oh yeah, the Weasley twins will be here later on tonight, I’ll tell them not to do anything to you, but

just make sure that you don't eat anything tonight that you're not sure of, Ok?"

To Harry's surprise Dudley burst out laughing, Dudley really had grown up, and gotten a real sense of humor in the bargain, this was nice to see.

"I don't suppose they'd give me some of their stuff, so I could take it to school?"

"I'll ask, but I don't think so, you'd have a hard time explaining the effects of some of their products."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Worth a try though. See you later Harry, don't blow anyone up."

With that Dudley opened the door to see Peter there, they exchanged greetings and traded places, with Peter sitting down on Harry's bed.

"Getting along with them better? He doesn't quite come across as the monster you made him out to be."

"I think the prospect of me leaving has given all four of us a bit of a pause, Dudley more so than his parents. I think if none of this emancipation stuff had come up Dudley might still have been easier to deal with than in the past. My aunt and uncle.....I don't know about them, I'll just be glad to be away from them."

"Are Luna and Neville coming tonight? Have you gotten your OWL results yet?"

"Yes and no. Luna and Neville are coming tonight as far as I know, and the OWL owl hasn't gotten here yet. I read over the Occlumency books you gave me, I made some notes if you want to look at them." Harry handed over his notebook and watched Peter try to decipher his chicken scratch.

"Well it looks like you're understanding what to do. I think Snape's half baked lessons probably opened your mind more to Voldemort, not less. 'Clear your mind' and nothing else, honestly." Peter shook

his head in exasperation. "Ok, are you ready to begin building your barriers and alarms? Today and probably tomorrow I'm only going to be lightly probing your defenses, making you aware that there's an invasion in the first place so you can have everything in place as quickly as possible. Then on Wednesday and Thursday we're going to practice with me doing full out assaults. This doesn't have to be complete Harry, but given that we have only four days to do this, and for only an hour at a pop at that. I would schedule more, but as you discovered with Snape, learning this tends to tire out your mind. I know Voldemort hasn't tried anything so far this summer, but that's not bound to last. It wouldn't do to have you more vulnerable to his tinkering. I have little doubt that if he tried it tonight while you're in bed, he'd find out what's going on here. That's a chance we'll have to take though.....though I don't think he'd rat you out to Dumbledore Harry." They both smiled at that one, knowing that however much hatred Voldemort had for Harry, he hated Dumbledore 10 times as much.

They spent the next hour practicing barriers. Peter put very little force in his Legilimancy, getting Harry accustomed to another presence in his mind before actually moving about in it. Snape had adopted to use the 'throw them in off the deep end and see if they swim' technique, the same technique he used in his potions classes to varying degrees. Peter preferred to dip Harry's head in and let him be wet for awhile before making him do any work.

It was now 6:00 pm and Peter signaled that they were finished.

"That was a good start Harry, I think by Friday you'll be fine.....as long as we can get rid of your favorite professor quickly enough. Bill should be getting here any minute, and the twins too."

Just then, a tapping could be heard on the bedroom window. Winky went over to open it and let the large grey owl inside. The owl had with him (it was a him, don't ask me how) an official looking envelope with the twin crests of the Ministry of Magic and The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry took the envelope with shaking hands, and the grey owl went on his way. The doorbell rang at the same time, Peter went downstairs to go get Bill.

Harry looked at the envelope with dread, all of the sudden he began to think that he hadn't done very well. Reason after reason invaded his mind about why he had done badly on this test or that. He waited for the others to come up so that he could have some moral support.

The bedroom door opened again and the room was full of Weasleys, well three of them anyway. Bill came first, followed by Fred and George. To Harry's disappointment there was no Ron.

"Hiya there mate," Gred and Forge said in unison, each slapping Harry on the shoulder. They looked around the room they had broken Harry out of 4 years earlier. Fred said:

"It looks better without the bars on the window Harry, that wasn't a nice decorative touch."

Harry pointed to the wall around the window, the scars of the bars were still there as the twins admired their handiwork. Bill saw Harry looking questioningly at him.

"I'm sorry Harry, I didn't get much of a chance to talk with Ron, Hermione was there yesterday and most of today. I can tell you that they're pretty worried about you, they commented on your lovely vague letters that they got yesterday. Hermione, surprise, surprise, was on pins and needles waiting for the owl scores. I told them I was going to talk to you tonight, so they wrote down what they got so that I could show you. I'm supposed to take back a copy of yours as well. Have you looked?"

"No Bill, I'm afraid to. You'll still talk to Ron though, this week? I don't want Friday to happen without him having some advance warning if possible."

"I will Harry, Hermione went home right before I left, her parents picked her up, so she won't be seeing Luna or Neville on the Knight Bus.....they're coming right?"

"I hope so, they haven't told me they're not. Oh Bill, one more thing.....Ron and Hermione....they weren't....how can I say this...?"

Bill knew his answer wouldn't be what Harry wanted to hear, so he figured he should soften it as much as he could.

"Did I catch them snogging at all? Is that what you want to know?"

The whole room started giggling as Harry had a revolted look on his face.

"That's not how I would have put it Bill, but I guess that's what I mean."

Bill and the twins looked at each for a moment, and that's all the answer Harry really needed. Bill felt he should say something though.

"Yes Harry, they are together. They told Mum, Dad, and Ginny last night, apparently it's been going on for a couple of weeks. I asked them if they had bothered to tell you yet, but they pointed out that you had asked them not to write.....which is very convenient I know, but try not to kill them the next time you see them." Fred chimed in:

"Just for the record mate, the three of us didn't know before today. George and I aren't at The Burrow much, and when we are we have better things to do than follow those two around.....but I promise you that we would have said something if we'd known about it." George nodded in agreement, as did Bill. Harry just shrugged, and silently told himself that what he was hoping to do was made a little bit easier. George decided that a change of subject was in order:

"Out with mate, open up the golden envelope, let's see what you got."

Harry closed his eyes and said a silent prayer, then he opened the envelope. He couldn't find his voice, so he handed the letter to one of the twins to read. George started reading aloud:

Dear Mr. Harry James Potter,

Enclosed are your scores from the June sittings of your Ordinary Wizarding Levels. The exams were graded impartially and all judges and examiners were tested with veritaserum to ensure no bias. This step is undertaken each year to guarantee reliability in our tests. We

look forward to testing you again 2 years hence in your Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests, good luck with your academic career at Hogwarts.

The grades available are as follows:

O- Outstanding

E- Exceeds Expectations

A- Acceptable

P- Poor

T- Terrible

N/A- didn't take the exam offered

An 'O' score is worth 2 owls, an 'E' or an 'A' is worth one owl. 'P' and 'T' scores are worth zero owls. The difference between an 'E' and an 'A' may be seen in the NEWT classes you are eligible to take. The difference between 'P' and 'T' is solely for you own knowledge, to see how close you came.

In addition, the highest score of the year in each subject will receive the Governor's Award, those recipients, along with the Top Ten overall scores, will be honored at a banquet to be held at Hogwarts on the 3rd Sunday in September. If you received the highest score of the year in a particular subject, a score of 'OO' will be shown, as well as your name being on the list at the end.

Scores for Harry James Potter, Gryffindor, are as follows:

Ancient Runes: N/A

Arithmancy: N/A

Astronomy: A

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Charms: OO

Defense Against the Dark Arts: OO

Divination: A

Herbology: E

History of Magic: A

Muggle Studies: N/A

Potions: A

Transfiguration: E

You have received a total of 12 OWL's Mr. Potter, congratulations.
The Top Ten students of the year are as follows:

1. Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw
2. Terry Boot, Ravenclaw
3. Hermione Granger, Gryffindor
4. Harry Potter, Gryffindor
5. Blaise Zabini, Slytherin
6. Michael Corner, Ravenclaw
7. Ernie MacMillan, Hufflepuff
8. Hannah Abbot, Hufflepuff
9. Stephen Cornfoot, Ravenclaw
10. Draco Malfoy, Slytherin.

The Governors' Awards go to the following students:

Ancient Runes: Terry Boot, Ravenclaw

Arithmancy: Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw

Astronomy: Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw

Care of Magical Creatures: Hannah Abbot, Hufflepuff

Charms: Harry Potter, Gryffindor

Defense Against the Dark Arts: Harry Potter, Gryffindor

Divination: Parvati Patil, Gryffindor

Herbology: Neville Longbottom, Gryffindor

History of Magic: Hermione Granger, Gryffindor

Muggle Studies: Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hufflepuff

Potions: Blaise Zabini, Slytherin

Transfiguration: Lisa Turpin, Ravenclaw

We congratulate these winners, and look forward to dining with them, along with Mssrs. Corner, Cornfoot, MacMillan, and Malfoy, at the banquet in September.

Griselda Marchbanks

Ministry of Magic

So no Potions, he hadn't even been close to Snape's cutoff. Harry had been waffling about being an Auror, this cinched it, he was going to have to find something else to do with his life after school. Oh well, he'd think about that later, once he looked at the career manual that Peter gave him.

“12 OWL’s Harry, that’s double what we got.....combined!”

Bill looked at George like that was something to brag about, getting only 3 OWL’s apiece.

“Congratulations Harry, and 4th in your class to boot, that’s terrific.”

“How did Hermione react Bill? She didn’t do as well as I thought she would. And just out of curiosity twins, I never found out what your OWLs were in.”

Bill and Fred looked at each other, Fred spoke first:

“We each got an O in Charms, and an E in Potions. Snape couldn’t believe it, but Flitwick was delighted. I heard he was bragging in the staff room that he was the one professor to have actually gotten through to us.”

The room got a laugh out of that one, Harry looked at Bill for his Hermione answer:

“She didn’t take it too well Harry, I didn’t want to mention this before you opened the scores, since I knew from looking at Ron’s and Hermione’s letters that you had gotten the two OO’s and 4th overall in the class. I will tell you there were tears and yelling, and she mentioned more than once about protesting. Ron was a bit quieter, as you’re about to see.”

With that, Bill took two folded pieces of paper out of his pocket and gave them to Harry. Harry opened the first one, which were Hermione’s, and with a nod from Bill began reading aloud:

Ancient Runes: O

Arithmancy: O

Astronomy: E

Care of Magical Creatures: A

Charms: O

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Divination: N/A

History of Magic: OO

Herbology: O

Muggle Studies: N/A

Potions: E

Transfiguration: O

OWL total: 16

Class Rank: 3rd

Gryffindor Rank: 1st

“Well I know she was hoping for all O’s, but I hear that’s practically impossible. The ‘A’ is a bit of a shocker, and how did she only get an ‘E’ in Defense?”

“Oh Harry my friend, she’s wondering those same things herself. If she knows how to make a howler, I pity poor Griselda Marchbanks. To be honest I was kind of glad she left, it was getting tiring listening to her complain. Better open Ron’s and get it over with.”

Ancient Runes: N/A

Arithmancy: N/A

Astronomy: A

Care of Magical Creatures: E

Charms: P

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Divination: N/A

History of Magic: P

Herbology: A

Muggle Studies: N/A

Potions: E

Transfiguration: A

OWL total: 6

Class Rank: 30th

Gryffindor Rank: 8th

“Yikes, that’s not good at all. Is he still alive? Did your mum kill him?”

“No Harry, she didn’t, she was actually pretty calm about it. Ron has been preparing her for it, or so he told me. He rationalized to her that at least he did better than the twins, even though he didn’t get any O’s. He would get this twitch in his eye whenever Hermione went off on a rant about ‘only 16 OWL’s’, but he somehow managed not to punch her. I wasn’t the only one ready for her to get out of there Harry, and I was only there for 30 minutes with her, imagine poor Ron having to listen to it for the full two hours.....if nothing else it’s proof of how much he loves her I suppose.”

Harry and the twins shuddered, and Harry quickly scribbled down his scores on two pieces of paper, so that Ron could see and copy, and send Pig to Hermione with the other. They heard a squeal of tires outside, and saw the Knight Bus pull up, discharging Neville and Luna. George went downstairs to let them in. He saw Dudley on his way through the living room and absently slapped him on the back as he passed by. Dudley looked a hair nervous at first, but calmed down

once he didn't change into anything. Luna and Neville gave polite greetings to the Dursleys, whom neither of them had ever met (but heard much about) and received them in turn, they then proceeded behind George upstairs to Harry's room. They looked at the gathering of players in our little drama, and immediately noted the absence of Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. Neville walked up to Peter:

"Hello Mr. Tyson, how are you? Gran was wondering whether Harry had hired you."

"I'm fine Neville, please call me Peter. Hello Luna, pleasure to meet you again."

"And to you as well Peter. Hello Harry."

"Hi Luna, hello Neville....I'm glad you two could come, have a seat."

Neville and Luna looked around and couldn't see where to sit down. Bill took that hint and waved his wand, magically expanding the room to double its size. Peter conjured up some chairs and everyone sat down, the twins sitting on the bed.

"Luna knows me Harry, because I've done some work for her father in the past. Folks, we're all here because we, in effect, are the people that Harry trusts most. Some of you have noted the absence of people like Ron and Hermione, Hagrid, Dumbledore, Molly and Arthur. Our opponent here isn't Voldemort, its Dumbledore. We're going to get Harry free, and we're going to need the counsel and help of everyone in this room. Here's the plan:

Peter proceeded to lay out the strategy, including what Harry was studying, and the events that were to take place on Friday and hopefully the following Monday (the emancipation hearing). Neville was the only one of the newcomers to speak during this presentation, asking a couple of questions about the Snape plan, otherwise they were silent and contemplative. Fred looked at Bill:

"You said this would be huge, big brother.....and you underestimated it. Peter, you've laid out quite a detailed strategy, full of pitfalls and potential consequences. What do you feel the odds are for success?"

Peter looked at Harry, he had never volunteered odds to Harry, and the lad had never asked him for any. This was the time to be honest though.

"I would say we have about a 50 percent chance of total success. By total success I mean getting Harry out of here, out of Hogwarts, and out of Great Britain.....the latter two of which are pretty entwined, but not completely. I think getting Harry out of here will be pretty easy, probably 90 percent. Dumbledore is a formidable adversary, and he'll use all his pull on Fudge and the Wizengamot to keep Harry at least at Hogwarts. Harry, the important thing to remember, even if this doesn't work, you can always leave next year. Once you turn 17 your life is yours to do with as you please, and you can go to school for 7th year anywhere you like."

"I know Peter, and I'm aware that this might not work. But as long as we give it our best chance, I'm prepared to deal with what happens, either way."

"If it comes to it Harry, can you handle a split decision? Leaving here but staying at Hogwarts?"

Harry hesitated for a minute, he looked at the faces around him, the people he trusted most in the world.

"To be honest Peter, no, I don't think I could handle a split decision if it came to it. I've been thinking about this ever since Friday and I've decided that if I can't leave Britain as a wizard, I'll leave it as a muggle, and go to a muggle boarding school somewhere else." Nobody said anything for a moment, and Peter decided that he had to get control of the situation quickly.

"Well let's hope that we don't have to test that out. Ok, back to this coming Friday, is there any one of you who can't be here? Snape is supposed to arrive at 7 pm, according to our spy, Mr. Bill Weasley."

Everyone nodded their assent that they could be there at the appointed time.

“One more thing troops.” The group smiled as Bill said that. “Bring your wands, even those of you who aren’t allowed to use them.....just in case.”

It was now 7:00 pm, and Peter made to leave:

“Well I must be going, I have my own set of twins,” he grinned at Fred and George, “that need to be tucked in, 5 year old girls, they’re going to be the death of me when they start dating, so I’m appreciating them that much more now.” The room laughed and bade him goodnight. After confirming his Occlumency lesson the next day with Harry, he left.

The six of them sat around for another two hours chatting, talking about their school experiences.

Neville showed off his own OWL results, Harry and the twins had already seen his Herbology award:

Arithmancy: N/A

Ancient Runes: N/A

Astronomy: E

Charms: A

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Defense Against the Dark Arts: E

Divination: N/A

Herbology: OO

History of Magic: A

Muggle Studies: E

Potions: A

Transfiguration: A

OWL total: 11

Class Rank: 11th

Gryffindor Rank: 3rd

Harry and the others were very impressed with Neville's scores, only one less owl than Harry himself. It had helped that Neville hadn't failed any classes, unlike Ron. Harry wondered about Neville being 11th in their year and him 4th, with only one OWL between them, but Bill explained that they took overall scores into consideration, that was where the difference between E's and A's, and P's and T's came into play, even if the pairs were worth the same number of OWL's. Bill allowed that he had received 18 OWL's, which went a long way to making him Head Boy.

By 9:00 pm everyone was getting ready to leave, Bill to go back outside to be on guard duty, Fred and George to make sure Lee and Ginny hadn't burned the shop down, and Neville and Luna to go back home. The 'adults' (I use that term loosely in reference to the twins) had left, and Neville, Harry and Luna sat there for a minute, contemplating. Neville and Luna were sitting next to each other, and while they were not holding hands, it appeared as though their hands were touching.

"So are you two official yet?" He said this with a smile, and Neville and Luna looked at each other nervously.....nervously, Harry had never seen Luna nervous before. Even before the DOM she had looked serene. Neville answered him.

"Well not really, we've been owling at lot since summer started." He tensed up a second, and took Luna's hand, which caused her to blush furiously, but she squeezed it back.

"I'm really happy for you guys, I think you make a great couple." Luna smiled at hearing that.

"Thank you Harry, and for inviting me Harry, it means a lot to me to know that you trust me so much."

"You're welcome Luna, you and Neville have shown me time and time again that I can count on you both.. I hope you know that I'd be there for you too." Luna and Neville both nodded, and she asked what she and Neville had both been thinking since the meeting had started.

"Harry, are you sure about Ronald and Hermione? What will they say Friday when they learn you kept them out of it?"

"They'll be hurt Luna, no doubt about that. I would hope though, that they'd be mature enough to understand that I felt that I had reason to do what I did, even if they don't agree with the reasons themselves. And we still might reach Ron, Bill and the twins are going to see about it."

"What if they aren't mature enough Harry.....I know he's your best friend, but I just don't see Ronald being mature enough to deal with this. And Hermione.....you know I don't like talking badly about anyone Harry, but she's....."

"I know Luna, and in my heart I agree with what you just said. If they don't understand?.....then a nice five year friendship will be over. I believe I've earned some slack from those two, as much as they've been there for me guys, I've been there for them just as much. I doubt Hermione would have any friends at Hogwarts if Ron and I hadn't taken her in, Parvati and Lavender can't stand her, neither really can Dean and Seamus, You don't seem to doesn't mind her Neville, but I you notice didn't stick up for her tonight. And Ron.....Ron, Ron, Ron.....he's been my best friend and he's given me a family. I hope Bill and the twins can get through to him. I would give my life to save Ron's, but I won't risk it just to please him."

"I understand Harry."

"What about those two as a couple, are you upset about that?"

“Not really Neville, if anything I’m happy that they finally did something about it. That they didn’t tell me about it.....well it’s done now, the toothpaste is out of the tube.”

They chatted about inconsequential things for a few minutes, the kind of relaxed talk that friends have.....even if two of them are holding hands. Neville looked at his watch, and discreetly coughed:

“We’d better get going Luna. See you Friday Harry, I’ll tell Gran you’re doing just fine.”

“Thank you Neville.....for everything mate.”

“And you as well Harry,” with that, Neville walked downstairs.

Author’s Note: About the OWL results.....I’ve read a lot of fics with Harry getting an O in Potions, and I just can’t buy it, not with the level of teaching he’s gotten over a five year span. The next chapter the stuff really comes together, the first serious deviations from Straw, and Snape will be in it up to his neck.

Remus paced around the house, just waiting. Remus hadn't had much to do lately, with so many of the known Death Eaters in Azkaban, thanks to Harry and friends. That was what worried Remus, that now Voldemort would be staffed by people that they hadn't pegged. At least with Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle and their ilk, they knew who they were dealing with. This quiet was very disconcerting, Remus too had noted the lack of visions that Harry was getting. Remus had to admit that if he was in Voldemort's position he would be reminding Harry about Sirius' death every chance he could, to hopefully drive the boy insane.

As it was, Remus was worried about Harry's mental health anyway. He wasn't convinced by Harry's bland assurances that things were better with the Dursleys, this was the second summer in a row that Harry was forced to go there soon after witnessing a death. Dumbledore amazed Remus sometimes, the man had spent a lifetime around children, but did not seem to understand how to handle them. Remus was not alone among the Order in wondering what Dumbledore was going to do next summer when Harry turned 17. Remus and Tonks both had dropped a few hints about it, but if Dumbledore even knew himself, he wasn't saying. Remus again thought that Voldemort too wasn't handling his end of the war well, not that he was complaining of course. If Remus had been in charge of the dark side he would have forced the final confrontation as soon as possible, before Harry got any better trained.

No, Remus didn't know the Prophecy. That said, both Dumbledore and Harry would have been horrified to know how many Order members had guessed its content, if not its exact words. All the clues pointed to some sort of final showdown between Harry and Voldemort: the hiding of Harry at Privet Drive, the lack of information Harry was given about both current events and his past, Dumbledore keeping Snape so close. What Remus couldn't figure out is why Dumbledore had been so tolerant of the shoddy Defense Against the Dark Arts teaching over the last five years. There had been two good teachers Remus thought, himself (Remus was modest, but even he knew this) and the fake Moody, Barty Crouch Jr.....Death Eater though he was, Harry and his friends swore up and down that they learned loads from him, Harry now knew how to throw off the Imperious Curse, something few wizards could do

quickly.....another puzzling happening as far as Remus was concerned, why would a Death Eater have gone to so much trouble to make his enemy better? On the other side of the balance sheet, there were three years when almost nothing was learned, what with Quirrel and his stuttering, Lockhart and his preening, and Umbridge.....Remus couldn't think about Umbridge without wanting to rip something apart, so he stopped that line of thought.

Dumbledore had been hinting to him that he might be getting the Defense job back this year. Once again there was a problem filling the post and Dumbledore seemed quite reluctant to give Snape the job.....if Snape truly wanted the job, Remus had heard the rumors along with everyone else, but Snape had never flat out said it in front of him. Remus wanted the position, he liked being around kids and being able to spend some time with Harry. He felt that if he'd at least gotten another year at Hogwarts that he and Harry would have a much better relationship, and the last wouldn't be so untrusting. Maybe this year would be different, quiet. He knew this was wishful thinking.

Privet Drive

Noon

Dear Harry,

Did you see those OWL scores! An 'A'! What are those examiners thinking! Either that or Hagrid, I knew we should have had a proper teacher all this time. I know if that Professor Grubbly-Plank had been there the entire time I wouldn't have gotten an 'A'. Honestly, teaching us about all those monsters didn't help us one bit! And Defense! I messed up on one spell, one! It wasn't even that big a mistake, so I mispronounced Relashio, did I deserve a grade lowering just for that!

Two Ravenclaws beat me, not one, but two! How can I ever show my face in the library again? I sent my protest off just now with Errol, this is going to get fixed if I have to howler the entire Ministry of Magic. At least we both did better than Malfoy, the git didn't even get the Potions award. Maybe if we had classes with Ravenclaws I would

have been challenged more, I just know I'm smarter than Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot. Ugghghhhh.

I hope you're doing well Harry, I'm not sure how much I believe your letter. I'll see you when Dumbledore allows you to leave your relatives, hopefully it will be for your birthday, I know that Ron and I both miss you, please write to us more often. I hope you are doing what the Headmaster says and that you're not arguing with him, he knows best.

Yours,

Hermione

Harry read this letter with a resigned kind of attitude. This was so typical of Hermione, competitive to the end. It was so nice of her to congratulate him on how he did (sarcasm). That girl.....Harry gritted his teeth. Harry agreed with her about Hagrid, in principle, but notwithstanding the man's unwavering faith in Dumbledore, Harry would always have a soft spot for the half-giant who had first told him about how he was a wizard. He would never tell Hagrid that he wasn't that hot a teacher though, even if he wouldn't put it past Hermione to go spare on the guy when she got to school.

The line about not being challenged by anyone in her classes had rankled him quite a bit, after all he had beaten her in three of the seven classes that they shared (Defense, Charms, and Care of Magical Creatures), though she had solid victories in the other four, as well as O's in her other elective classes (Ancient Runes and Arithmancy). Harry knew that Hermione was very smart, but that in wizard life there was book smart, and practical smart. Harry realized that in terms of book smarts Hermione was way ahead of him, but that he was capable of narrowing that gap somewhat if he worked harder, as he certainly planned to. Practical-wise they were about even; Harry better in Charms and Defense, Hermione in Transfiguration and Potions. He figured he could have closed that gap in Transfiguration if he studied harder, though that wouldn't be a factor now that he was leaving.

.....and it hadn't escaped his attention that there was no mention of her relationship with Ron, so much for the 'you told us not to write

you' excuse. He knew he wasn't going to bother writing back to her, after all, what was there to write back to? Respond to one of her rants? Harry felt that he'd rather do something productive, like going outside to watch the grass grow.

That was a good idea now that he thought about it, he probably should at least get some fresh air, even if he stayed in the yard. He would do that after he read Ron's letter:

Hey Harry,

Good job on your OWLs mate, Bill showed them to all of us when he stopped by for breakfast this morning. 12 OWL's, that's as many as Percy got you know, and he made Head Boy. Mum and Dad said to send their congrats too. Mine were better than I had feared they would, but not as good as I'd hoped for, I wanted at least one 'O', but I guess it wasn't to be. No Auror training for me it looks like, but I bet they'll still let you in, even if you don't take Potions. No more Snape anyway, that's the one bright spot.

Mum thinks Dumbledore will let you out of there for your birthday, she says we'll have some kind of party at Headquarters. Oh yeah, we're moving there on Thursday, for the rest of the summer. Mum is doing more and more work with the Order, now that there's just Ginny and I at home. Work is going fine, I have more money in my pocket than I ever had before, its hard not to spend it, but I've been good. I know that Hermione has a letter here for you, she wouldn't let me read it but I can guess what it says. Oh well, I'd better floo off to work, Fred and George won't like it I'm late. See you soon Harry, don't let the muggles get you down

Ron

Harry noted the sad tone of the letter, it didn't make him feel too good either after reading it. Ron's shot about his Auror chances hadn't gone unnoticed by Harry, but he dismissed it, he would have been somewhat bitter too if he had gotten those marks. Harry couldn't think of anything that he could write to Ron that wouldn't sound like he was rubbing his marks in Ron's face. Even a 'cheer up, they weren't that bad' likely wouldn't go over too well. Ron's pride was very touchy

most of the time, and it had taken quite a blow yesterday. Plus, from what Bill had told him and from the undertone of Ron's own letter, Hermione hadn't helped anything with her whining. Harry knew that this might be the last straw (no pun intended) with Ron, especially after this weekend. The two of them did most of their studying together and his scores had been much better, Ron only beating him in Potions. He felt sorry enough for Ron that he could hardly be mad at him for hiding his thing with Hermione.

He put his likely soon-to-be former friends to the side for the moment, and headed outside. No klaxons went off when he touched the front walk, and no wizards appeared out of no-where, so he assumed he was allowed out. He went to the middle of the lawn and laid down, soaking up the fresh air and the sun.

Thursday, July 26, 1996

Privet Drive 5:00 pm

Peter walked up to Number 4 Privet Drive lost in thought. His Occlumency lessons with Harry the last two days had gone very well. It was pretty clear that the kid could learn quickly with a decent teacher. He knew that Harry still wasn't quite ready to face Snape and Dumbledore for any extended period of time, if for no other reason than Harry might well try to curse them the moment he saw them. Harry had always had good control of his emotions, outside of a few notable incidents, but just hearing the word 'Snape' put a look on his face that would boil cheese.

He rang the doorbell, and Petunia let him inside. On Tuesday Peter had realized that he needed a cover story in case Dumbledore or one of the minders approached her about his frequent visits. He and Petunia had kicked around ideas and came up with the plan of telling them that she was taking an exam to get her Real Estate license in a couple of weeks, and he was brother of one of Vernon's co-workers that they hired to tutor her for it. It sounded fairly odd to Peter, but he figured it would pass muster with any wizard. So far so good though, Petunia hadn't seen or heard from a wizard outside of Harry's new circle since King's Cross. She and Vernon had been reasonably friendly toward him in the last week, but it was never far in the back of

Peter's mind how they had treated Harry for 15 years. He agreed with the lad that they were being nice merely because the end was near. Another factor was the fear that Harry would do something to him when he reached his majority, Harry had introduced Dobby and Winky to them on Tuesday and made it clear that they would protect him for any attacks. When he had said 'any' he looked straight at Vernon, causing the man to flinch noticeably. Nothing had happened though, Vernon had not thrown one insult his way since he had been back.....there were so many wizards and wizard 'friends' threatening him that he didn't know who to fear most.

The muggle emancipation hearing the day before had gone as well as could be expected. Peter had brought his wand with him just in case he had to do a little helping, but thankfully he was not forced to use it. The civil servant they dealt seemed almost not to care about their story, and after a few cursory questions and checking Harry to make sure he had not been beaten in any way, issued a ruling that conditionally emancipated Harry come his 16th birthday the next week. The condition was only that he not get into any trouble with the police over the next two years, if that happened, then his situation would be revisited. The six of them left the government building with large smiles on their faces, and compliments flew around the car (which Peter had enlarged) all the way home. Peter had never seen Harry more relaxed, he now had the freedom to not return to Privet Drive after this was all over, and not to return to Hogwarts if he was willing to go strictly muggle for a year.

He made his way upstairs into Harry's room, which he had enlarged on Tuesday so that the two of them could pace around in it if need be.

"All right there Harry? How's your reading coming?"

"Pretty well Peter, I'm just reading the books now to get a handle on them. Once I've done that, I'll go through them again and take notes. Since I can't practice the spells for a few more weeks, I might as well learn the theory a bit better."

"Good plan Harry, the theory may be a bit boring, but it will help you put more power into the spell if you understand why. Remember, spell casting seems to be your strength, and you should always hone

your strengths. It will help with Transfiguration too, I know you got a good grade, but that's the other main spell casting subject and you can always improve."

They spent the next hour doing Occlumency, Harry getting better and better at forcing Peter out of his mind. It wasn't so much that Harry was getting quicker at it, though he was getting better at that too, but that his force-outs were much more powerful. After the last one of the session, Peter had needed a few minutes to recover, given that he was knocked back about five feet from the chair he was sitting in. Rubbing his elbow where he had nailed it on the edge of the desk, he congratulated Harry.

"Ok, let's stop there, I think you have the hang of it now. I'm confident that you can resist Snape if need be, at least for a minute or two anyway. I have some big news for you, and I wanted to wait until your lesson was over so as not to distract you."

"What is it?"

"I have a meeting set up for us with Minister Fudge, for tomorrow morning at 10 am, the subject of which will be to discuss your emancipation petition, which I hand delivered him about three hours ago."

"How did he react?"

"He wasn't the least bit shocked Harry, which only confirms my opinion that one of the watchers outside must be from him, not that he admitted it when I asked him. Ever since the first day I've put some disguising charms so that I wouldn't be recognized by any Order members, but his person or persons must have pegged me from that first day. Trust me, Fudge can't hold a poker face that well."

"Ok, so he wasn't shocked.....did he seem pleased at all?"

"He looked satisfied, and that's good for us."

"How much is his help going to cost me Peter?"

“Probably nothing, if you convince him that you are North America bound sometime next month. Fudge is not quite so bold as to openly ask for a bribe, so I don’t think you need to bring any money with you. Now the thing to remember is this: Whatever happens, don’t lose your temper with him. The man is obtuse sometimes to be sure, so we just have to roll with those punches and let the situation unfold in a very calm way. I can tell you that he no longer believes that you made up the Voldemort revival, but please resist temptation to rub his nose in it. I repeat, this is not a time to settle scores Harry. If you really are taking on Dumbledore, we can’t have Fudge as an enemy too.”

“I understand Peter.....can I taunt him if he turns us down?” He smiled saying that, which relieved the other man greatly.

“No Harry, no gloating.....unless you want to make total peace with Dumbledore.....which of course means total surrender to the old man.....”

“Ok, ok, I get it. I’ll be nice to Fudge if that’s what you’re telling me.”

“That’s what I’m telling you. Now I’ve already talked with your aunt, she’s going to drive you into London tomorrow so that you can keep the appointment, I’m willing to bet that they don’t have muggle transportation with which to follow you directly, they’ll have to rely on their tracking charms, your not leaving this place yet this month has probably made them somewhat complacent. We’re going to meet at the Leaky Cauldron and floo over to the Ministry from there. Right before we floo, I’ll remove the tracking charms that are on you right now. Dumbledore should get an alert when his charm(s) is/are taken off, but he won’t know where you’re going until its too late.”

“Am I really coming back here afterward? What if Dumbledore comes with Snape?”

“Then you run out the backdoor and use the emergency portkey I’m going to give you after our Fudge appointment, it will take you straight to my office, and I have a plan from there. Now the letter, did you write it?”

Harry nodded and brought it out:

Dear Professors Dumbledore and Snape,

This is to inform you that Professor Snape is not under any circumstances welcome in our home. We would prefer no wizards at all but we know that given your callous disregard for our wishes in the past that that is unlikely. However, you will respect our wishes on this. We're not concerned with what supposed lessons that Harry must take, you have him 10 months out of the year at that school, plenty of time to teach him whatever you think is so important.

Signed,

Vernon Dursley

Petunia Dursley

Dudley Dursley

PS: I should tell you Professor Dumbledore that I agree with this, do not send that man to our home.

Harry Potter

"Nice Harry, your uncle's handwriting?"

"Yeah, I wrote out the text and we had him copy it, then we all signed it. I think he had a good time with it."

Both of them smiled, indeed Vernon Dursley had been itching to write a letter like that for five years. Now he was doing so with Harry's consent and active participation. It was a world gone mad.

"Okiedokie Harry, lets go ahead and send it."

Harry walked over and gave the note to Hedwig, "You remember how to get to Headquarters girl? Make sure this goes right to Dumbledore, and no one else. Don't wait for a reply, just come right back here, Ok?"

Hedwig hooted twice and took off out of the window.

“Harry, its not too late to back out of this scheme. You have until Snape gets here to change your mind.”

“I won’t change my mind Peter, I’m in this all the way. Snape deserves payback for what he’s done to me all of these years. I’ll never forgive him for goading Sirius, I won’t back out.”

“Fair enough Harry, I just wanted you to know that you have choices, you’re not locked in. I can safely speak for the rest of us when I say that we’re in too. Easy for me to say of course, since I have no ties to Dumbledore as the rest of you do. Whatever happens should be interesting.”

Friday, July 27 1996

8:30 am

Little Whinging

Harry and Petunia left the house very nervously and got into the car, though no one stopped them or even tried to interfere. This was the first time Harry had left the property and the protections of the Blood Charms, and he was fairly surprised that nothing happened, maybe his watchers were being fooled. He was not wearing his glasses, as part of a last second inspiration to try to throw his watchers off the trail. They drove off in the direction of London, saying almost nothing to each other as they made the trip.....perhaps waiting for the ride back, if all went according to plan. They arrived at The Leaky Cauldron, and Petunia agreed to wait in the bookstore across the street until Harry was done.

“Good luck Harry.”

“Thanks Aunt Petunia.” This was almost a hugging moment, but the détente between the two of them hadn’t quite reached that level. He walked into the pub as casually as he could, where Peter was waiting for him by the front door, it was now 9:45 am. Tom the barkeep was

not in sight, and Harry and Peter took a table in the corner, away from the front door.

“Did you notice anyone following you?”

“No, and I was looking behind us all the way over here. No one followed us in a car that I could tell. How quickly can they follow us with the tracking charms?”

“Not quickly enough, we’ll be at the Ministry before they get here, though they will know we were here. We have to hope that they think you went into Diagon Alley to visit the twins or to go to your vault at Gringotts.”

“What about when we get to the Ministry? Someone there will tip off Dumbledore won’t they?”

“Good point, and one that Fudge and I have already planned for. At precisely 10 am the floo here will fire, initiated from Fudge’s office on a direct connect. We’ll hop in there and go right to the man himself, bypassing the corridors and all the prying eyes who might make a beeline to call Dumbledore.”

“I really hope this works.....what about Tom? What will he say?”

“Tom is Fudge’s man through and through Harry, he always has been, it’s the only way he would be allowed to be the keeper of the gateway to muggle London.” Peter then proceeded to eliminate the tracking charms on Harry’s person, and checked himself out again for the same kind of charms, finding nothing.

They sat there for a few minutes and contemplated things, and at the appointed time the floo fired up. The two walked over and in turn entered the floo, since it was a direct connect, no address needed to be called out for any hidden listeners, though there did not appear to be any other customers.

Office of the Minister of Magic for Great Britain

10 am

Harry tumbled out of the floo and was caught by Tyson, who had gone first. They brushed themselves off and Harry looked around at Fudge's very impressive office, which was very large and quite well decorated.....as befitting the head of a government, even Harry could admit that. The man himself was standing up in front of his desk, with a smile on his face.

"Hello Harry, Peter."

"Hello Minister," They both said at the same time. Harry took a deep breath and walked over to the Minister, holding out his right hand to shake. Fudge's smile widened a bit, and he shook Harry's hand, then Peter's as well.

"I can appreciate the ambivalence you must be feeling right now Harry, I was half wondering if you'd come out of the floo cursing me."

"Peter wouldn't let me sir, he said I have to appear calm and cool." Harry smiled when he said that, and Fudge and Peter both had a laugh, though only Peter knew how close to home that joke was.

"Well I'm glad you're here anyway, and under friendly circumstances."

"Will Percy not be joining us sir?"

"No he will not, we can't be having Dumbledore knowing about our little meeting can we?"

Harry's jaw hung wide open at hearing that, and even Peter looked astonished.

"So he was working for Dumbledore the entire time?"

"Of course he was, the whole break was fabricated by Dumbledore, Arthur, and Percy to try and spy on me.....let's just say Percy should check his apartment for listening charms a little bit more often."

"Yet you haven't sacked him, or Arthur."

“Not at all, Percy is useful in his own way, and he tells Dumbledore nothing that I don’t want him to know. All my private business is conducted privately, without him there. As for Arthur.....well loyalty to Dumbledore aside, I have a certain fondness for the man, and he does do an excellent job in his department. Besides, from what Peter told me yesterday at least three of his sons are on your side in this, perhaps his loyalty won’t be as absolute as it has been.” Harry decided to cut to the chase:

“Are you inclined to grant my application Minister?”

“I am Harry, but first I would like to know whether or not you are truly set against returning to Hogwarts.”

“I will not be a student at Hogwarts as long as Voldemort is alive and Dumbledore is Headmaster there.”

“So even if we removed the old man, you wouldn’t stay there?”

“No sir I wouldn’t. He would still be controlling things from behind the scenes.”

“What about your friends, I know you won’t want to leave them. Are you wanting to leave to keep them out of danger?”

“That’s part of it, yes sir.....but I just have the feeling that I’ll be much safer if I’m as far away from Dumbledore as I can get.”

“Why is he so obsessed with you Harry?” Harry and Peter looked at each other for a second. They had discussed this the night before, and had decided that Fudge might need to know about the Prophecy.

“He is under the impression that I’m the final weapon against Voldemort.” He was surprised to see Fudge chuckling.

“Oh come now Harry, I had that part figured out long ago. As soon as you started Hogwarts I’ve known about the old man’s coddling of you, I always thought he was keeping you in reserve for something. He never believed that He Who Must Not Be Named was gone, and even

though I disagreed with him, I knew he had something planned for you.”

“You didn’t think his concern for me was just me being ‘The Boy Who Lived?’”

“I’m sure that was some of it, yes, but no one monitors someone as closely as he does you without a better reason than that. I take it a prophecy in the Department of Mysteries talks about this final weapon status?” For crying out loud, Harry thought.....if Fudge of all people could figure this out, why had Dumbledore gone to so much trouble to hide things?

“There is, yes. It’s what Voldemort wanted so badly, only he or I could touch it, so he tricked me into going in there.”

“Yes I know, he was planting visions of Black being tortured.....Dumbledore told me, don’t look so surprised.”

“Yes, that’s why I went to the Department of Mysteries.”

“And how are you coming with your Occlumency?”

“Peter has me almost where I need to be, after only four days of lessons. I don’t know if I can keep Voldemort out yet, but I’m much further along than I would have been otherwise.”

“Good enough. Now there is something I need to know: Do you believe in all this Harry? Do you believe you’re the final weapon against him?”

Harry was silent for a moment as he thought about this. Even Peter, in a week full of long conversations with Harry, had never asked him this.....perhaps on purpose, perhaps not. He had asked about whether Harry believed the Prophecy.....but that wasn’t the same thing necessarily.

“No Minister, I don’t. I don’t believe the source of the Prophecy, I don’t believe that someone like that could predict something like this.”

“Who is the source?”

“Trelawney.” Fudge burst out laughing again, and almost fell out of his chair.

“No, seriously Harry, who is the source?”

Harry’s facial expression didn’t change, and Fudge realized that he wasn’t kidding.

“Well, well, isn’t that interesting. Hmmmmm.....let me ask you another question Harry, one that you must have thought of: If you do go abroad, a lot of people are going to call you a coward, that you’re too afraid of Voldemort to stick around. What would you say to that?”

“They never liked me anyway, most of our public is so fickle they wake up on a different side of the bed every morning. Even if the Prophecy was real, I don’t want to risk my life for them.”

“That’s very cynical of you Harry.....it’s quite accurate of course, but very cynical.”

“The press, Dumbledore.....and yes you Minister, you’ve all trained me quite well.”

Fudge’s smile was reduced a little bit, but he was nodding in agreement.

“Indeed we have. Where will you go from here?” Peter handled this one, since Harry had no concrete idea.

“My wife Jennifer has relations in the United States, and through her efforts and some of my own, I’ve comprised a list of the pros and cons of the various magic schools over there. There are four of them: one in northern California, one in western Oklahoma, one in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and the last one in western Massachusetts. The one in Michigan seems to be our best bet Harry, the Headmistress is no fan of our friend Dumbledore and will protect you from him.”

“What about Canada? I have that vault in Toronto after all.”

“True, but the Headmistress at the Maple Leaf School of Magic is a longtime friend of Dumbledore and I doubt she’d be willing to enroll you there if the old man objects. Admission of foreign students is taken on a case by case basis at most schools, and is not often granted. I doubt there are more than two or three foreign students at Hogwarts at any given time. Great Lakes is the second best academically of the American schools, but the Salem Witches Institute, which does take boys despite the title, is run by another ally of Dumbledore. No, our best bet is in Michigan Harry. What do you think Minister?”

“I agree with Peter, Maple Leaf and Salem are more likely to hand you back over to Dumbledore than to keep you, whereas there is some enmity between Dumbledore and Madam Murray, who runs Great Lakes. Its not going to take the old man long to figure out what you’re up to once he finds out about your emancipation.....yes Harry, I’m going to grant it.”

Harry had rarely felt more relieved in his life, and then something occurred to him:

“Why does he need to know at all? Can’t we keep this quiet until I’m long gone?”

“We can probably hide it for the rest of the day, but not after that. All legal decrees made by the Ministry, which this is, must be filed with the Wizengamot to be considered legal and binding. So we have a choice here: I can have it filed within ten minutes of your leaving here, which would tip Dumbledore off if he reads his mail promptly; or I can hold off until the end of the day, though as a consequence you would not be able to use magic until I have the decree filed.”

“Best to wait Harry, if Dumbledore knows you have wand rights then he’ll either come with Snape tonight or send others who’ll try to force you to do what he wants. He might even send Molly to tug on your emotions, and I know you won’t use your wand on her.” Harry was in agreement with this, but wondered at telling Fudge of the plan for Snape. Fudge anticipated this:

"Just don't use any Unforgivable curses against him and you'll be fine.....though it would be better if he fired first, if you what you truly want is to have him arrested.....oh yes, don't kill him either, that would hard to explain away, no matter what he did to provoke you."

"You're not opposed to what we're doing?"

"Of course not, having Dumbledore's favorite professor arrested would suit me just fine."

"I won't do anything illegal Minister, you have my promise on that."

"Good, now on to another subject, the trials of Lucius Malfoy and his gang. They are to take place the first week in October, and we will need you back to testify."

"Why the long delay?"

"It's the first week we have available for the volume of evidence that will be presented." Fudge looked so smug saying that, that Harry couldn't resist:

"And another three months in Azkaban for them wouldn't be so bad either eh?" Fudge winked at him.

"I don't have total control of the schedule Harry, its what the Wizengamot wants. I'm going to arrange to have the defendants put under the influence of Veritaserum.....and if more than one of them admits to seeing Peter Pettigrew live and in the flesh, I'll immediately write a full pardon for Black." That rocked Harry a little bit, who had been waiting for a chance to bring Sirius up.

"Thank you Minister, that's very good of you. I'm guessing that's why Sirius' will is being allowed?"

"In a manner, we have little jurisdiction over Gringotts matters as you might know, and I'm not willing to bargain the influence we have over something like a will."

“That makes sense.”

“We have our moments. Now Peter, what are your plans for Harry tonight after Snape is dealt with?”

“We’re going to hide you in muggle London Harry, at one of the chain hotels, and under a different name. When I get back to the office this morning I’m going to set up a meeting with Madam Murray from Great Lakes, hopefully to take place as soon as possible.”

“I’ll arrange for as many portkeys as you need Harry, though you might want to take muggle air transport to get over there.”

“Why is that sir?”

“The younger you are, the more dizzying the effect of international port keys, it can cause some ill effects.”

“He’s right Harry, I’ve always had it in the mind for you to leave here via Heathrow Airport, or Shannon Airport in Dublin. Even if they find out about it, they can’t risk doing anything in a muggle airport.” Fudge nodded his agreement, and took a piece of paper out of his desk.

“Best that I don’t know any more than what you’ve told me Harry, that way I can be more convincing to our friend.” With that, he signed the paper and pointed his wand at it

Duplico Duplico

There were now three copies of the paper, and Fudge handed Peter and Harry one each. Harry looked at it and saw that it was his emancipation petition, now officially approved by the Minister.

“As soon as this is filed with the Wizengamot, you are legally an adult Harry. I’ll send you an owl right after I do the filing, so don’t use your wand until then.”

“Yes sir, and thank you sir.”

“You’re welcome Harry, I’m sure we’ll talk again after your Snape encounter.”

“I hope we’ll both be smiling when that happens Minister.”

“As do I Harry, as do I.” Peter stood up, and Harry followed suit.

“Minister, if we may use your floo one more time, Harry and I need to do some business at Gringotts.”

“Certainly Peter, good luck tonight.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Oh yeah, Minister, if I may ask a question?”

“Certainly Harry.”

“What happened to Umbridge? Peter says that she hasn’t been seen since the centaur incident.”

“That madwoman is in St. Mungos where she belongs Harry. Her mind was clearly breaking even before the beasts got to her, whatever it is that they did. Rest assured that if she does recover sufficiently she will be brought to trial for what she did to you.”

Harry doubted this very seriously, but he was hardly in a position to call the man a liar (to his face). He was having difficulty reconciling this conversation with his recent history with Fudge, and this cooperation was making him feel dirty, he would have to take another shower the moment he got back to Privet Drive.

“Thank you for telling me sir.”

Fudge activated the floo (a security measure in this office was that only the Minister could activate the floo system from this end), and after another round of handshakes, Peter and Harry tumbled into Gringotts. Peter took a miniature cloak out of his pocket and enlarged it.

“Here, put this one and pull the hood over your face. Now we need to go to the foreign exchange counter and get you some muggle money. Do you need any galleons for the time being?”

“That depends on your fee, I have a thousand galleons in Gringotts’ drafts, will that be enough?”

“Yes it will, and I knew about them from reading that letter remember. Do you need any for another reason?”

“Do the Americans use the same kind of money? I have about thirty galleons and some sickles and knuts left in my money pouch.”

“Don’t worry about the Americans just yet, there’s plenty of time to prepare there. That should be enough wizard money to get you by for a week, given that you’ll be in muggle London the entire time. Let’s go, its right over here.” They headed over to an area that was far away from the front doors, but near the east floo (there were two of them, and one never knew which floo that you would come out of), a counter that Harry remembered seeing Hermione go to before second year. Harry pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, and it indeed made it very hard to see who he was. Peter led him over to the counter and the goblin appraised them casually, he was used to men skulking in here. Peter addressed him quietly:

“My friend here would like to change some galleons into muggle pounds, and we would like to get him a muggle credit card and driver’s license for him as well.”

“Let me have your key, ‘friend’”

Harry handed it over and the goblin had a very slight reaction when he saw whose it was.....but so slight you had to be looking for it.

“How many muggle pounds will you need young man?” Harry looked at Peter for the answer.

“I think we’ll go with two thousand pounds for now, we may be back at a later time for some more.”

“And the spending limit on the credit card? You can have from two hundred up to five thousand pounds.”

“The maximum please.”

“Very well. The current exchange rate is one galleon for two and a half British pounds. There will be a fifty galleon charge for the driver’s license, add our exchange fee of two percent, and your vault will be charged 4,170 galleons. The muggle credit card of course can only be used in the muggle world, and the five thousand pounds in are non-refundable, you must spend them out there to utilize them. Go into that door over there so we can take your photograph for the license.” He pointed to a doorway off to the right. Harry and Peter went over to it.

“Why do I need a credit card and a driver’s license?”

“You need them for the time you’ll be living as a muggle next week, as well as any time in the future you need to hide.”

“Won’t that give me a paper trail that Dumbledore can follow?”

“Not this time, the hotel room is already reserved for you, under my wife’s name. I have some muggle and squib clients, so I have uses for muggle money and credit.” They entered the room and Harry was directed by a different goblin to stand against the wall. He gave a nervous smile as his picture was taken, and they were then told to have a seat, as the goblin brought out some forms for Harry to fill out. They called for an address.....an address?

“What address do I give? I don’t have a home.”

“Just use Privet Drive, I’ll set up a postal box for you to get your muggle mail forwarded.”

Harry shrugged, and finished filling out the forms, handing them back to the goblin.

“Wait here for ten minutes, then go back to the foreign exchange counter, your things will be waiting for you there.” Without waiting for a response, the goblin left with the forms and the camera.

“Where do we go now? Back to the Leaky Cauldron?”

“Not exactly. I have a portkey that will take us to the loo inside the bookstore where your Aunt is waiting. The Leaky Cauldron is liable to be crawling with Dumbledore’s people right now, unless he doesn’t know that you’ve been anywhere that you shouldn’t have.” However, Peter didn’t look hopeful that that would be the case.

After another few minutes of waiting, they left the room and went back to the counter that they started at. The goblin, who did not introduce himself, handed Harry an envelope.

“All the things you requested are in the envelope. I have been instructed by Fortrap, the manager of your account, to ask you when you might be ready to hear the reading of a certain will.”

“Tell him that any time he sets for next week will be fine, he can reach me at my solicitor’s address.”

“Very well, good luck young man.”

“Thank you.” They walked back into the photography room and used the portkey.

Thankfully there was no one in the loo when they got there, and that it was wide enough.

“Sit tight, I’ll go arrange things with your aunt.”

He reappeared a few minutes later.

“I put a disguising charm on her and sent her round back, where the car is parked. You go back there in five minutes and she’ll be ready to go.....and for Merlin’s sake don’t tell her about the money, we’ve come too far for them to flake on us now. We’ll see you tonight, and we’ll be ready.”

"Thanks Peter, I'll see you then."

Harry ran around to the back and climbed into the car.....a car that he now had a license, though not the knowledge of how, to drive. After an hour in the car, Peter's disguising charm dissolved and Petunia was back. Few words were exchanged, only an acknowledgement that everything had gone to Harry's satisfaction. When they pulled into the driveway, Harry stopped her from getting out of the car right away. He leaned over to her, put his hand over his mouth, and muttered quietly:

"Are you three going to be here for this tonight?" She mimicked his actions and replied.

"Yes, this is our home, we won't be driven from it."

"Just keep out of the line of fire." She nodded, and after Harry put on a different pair of glasses (ones that he had gotten on the sly two summers earlier) they got out of the car. It was now just shy of 1 pm.

Flashback to 8:30 am, in the middle of Dursley front lawn.

Hestia Jones, sitting in a lawn chair under a Disillusionment Charm, watched Petunia and Harry drive off. She did a scan of the house to make sure that no one was still inside. She then moved outside the anti-Apparition ward and popped off to tell Dumbledore, who ironically enough was at the Ministry, doing some Wizengamot business.

"Did they have any bags or anything with them? Harry's trunk perhaps?"

"No sir, the only bag being carried was Petunia's handbag. I checked the car last night, and it has about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a tank of petrol in it."

"Enough to make it to London and back at least."

"That's not the direction they were headed sir, the main road to London is northeast, and they made the turn in the opposite direction,

toward the new mall in Little Whinging.” Dumbledore thought about this for a minute, but he wasn’t unduly worried.

“They may just be doing some food shopping.”

“There was one curious thing sir.”

“Yes Hestia?”

“Harry wasn’t wearing his glasses. He bumped into the car twice while trying to enter it.” Dumbledore looked rather relieved at hearing that.

“Well that should explain it then, he was going to get a new pair. It should take a couple of hours to get that accomplished. Be back at Privet Drive by 11 am Hestia. I have to be here the rest of the afternoon, I doubt I will be returning to Hogwarts before this evening. I’ll see you at Headquarters.”

“Yes sir.”

Back to present time:

Hestia revealed herself and approached them.

“You were gone quite awhile Harry, I was getting worried.” Harry kept himself as calm as possible, and reminded himself that he had four more hours before he could use his wand.....that said, there was nothing forcing him to respond, so he didn’t, he kept right on walking.

“Harry?”

“Get away from us freak, come no closer or I’ll call the police. I’m sure someone there knows about your filthy kind.” Harry just walked inside like there was no witch outside, followed by Petunia.

“You haven’t done that in awhile, must have felt good.” She gave him a tight lipped smile and disappeared into the kitchen to make some lunch.

At 4:55 pm Harry got the promised owl from Fudge, who wrote him that he filed the decree five minutes after Dumbledore left for the day. Harry was praying that Dumbledore wouldn't be going back to his Hogwarts office, which is where both he and Peter figured the hub for the tracking and listening charms were. As soon he got the owl he went upstairs and removed the tracking charms from his trunk and Hedwig's cage.

"Ok girl, go to the twins' shop and stay there for a few days, I'll either collect you there or they'll tell you where I am. I'm sorry Hedwig, there's no other way." She nipped his finger lightly, and flew out the window. He shrunk her cage and put it in his trunk, along with his clothes and other things (his books were already in there). He put the trunk by the door and went downstairs to watch television.....never letting his wand leave his hand the entire time.

Grimmauld Place, 6:30 pm

The bustle around Headquarters was loud as people moved in and out of the halls. If the portrait of Mrs. Black had still been hanging there she would have been shrieking like crazy. The problem of the portrait had been solved by Bill and his tomb raiding experience, he simply took out the wall around her. As she came off the wall she started screaming with a fervor that would have made a banshee proud, it had taken an all at once Reducto by Bill, Remus, Tonks, and Hestia to put her out of their misery. Kreacher had been sent off to Narcissa Malfoy after a massive memory wipe by Dumbledore, afterwards Kreacher knew his name and that he was to serve the House of Black, but that was about it. Snape strode through the house as if he owned it, looking for Dumbledore, sneering at those he passed by. The irritable Potions Master had returned from Halifax, Canada the day before from his conference. He ignored those who asked how it went and seemed to be in a worse mood than usual.

Remus noted that the house didn't seem quite as full as it could have been. Notably missing were Bill, Fred, George, and Charlie Weasley. Charlie had arrived that morning from Romania after an owl from Bill, ostensibly on a visit to his family, something he did a couple of times per year. He had immediately gone into a huddle with Bill, and then gone with him to work, not to return yet. Fred and George were at

their shop presumably, since both Ron and Ginny were here, as well as both Molly and Arthur, and Hermione. Tonks and Kingsley were the only significant absences, they were on guard duty at Harry's house, they had volunteered for tonight, understanding that Snape would be there.

Remus followed Snape into the kitchen, where Dumbledore was talking with Molly Weasley.

"Yes Molly, Harry will be coming here for a visit tonight so he can have some quality time with his friends."

"Oh really, and how am I to get your golden boy back here Albus? Or have you taught the brat how to Apparate?"

Dumbledore answered that by taking out a portkey and giving it to Snape. "Just have him say Headquarters while he has hold of it, and it will take him here. I have another one ready for his return."

"How long am I expected to waste my time there?"

"An hour should suffice Severus, we don't want to overwhelm him the first time. Just review the basics and have him practice. The spell I gave you, Temparo Indulcli, will only disable the blood protection for one hour, then you must be gone from the house."

"Fine, just so you know I believe this is a complete waste of time, that idiot has no aptitude for this."

He made to leave and Remus called out for him to stop.

"Oh Snape, if Harry doesn't come back with you I'm immediately going to apparate over there to find out why.....and if you've had anything to do with it....." Remus trailed off, leaving the threat a bit more than merely implied.

Snape yawned, and left the room. Molly looked after him with a slightly fearful expression, she was aware of what he might do to Harry.

“Molly, Remus, everything will be fine, Harry will be here by 8:00pm and we can enjoy ourselves for a few hours. I’m sure Ron, Ginny, and Hermione are eager to see him.”

Remus and Molly nodded, though he wasn’t so sure about that. Ginny was eager to see Harry of course, though she had only recently been able to say a complete sentence in his presence. Ron and Hermione, Remus knew, were ready with some hard questions about what Harry had been doing, or not doing. Remus knew that Harry rarely appreciated being under the third degree, so he was grateful that no one would be able to use their wands.

Privet Drive 7:00 pm

Snape strode up to the door at Number 4 Privet Drive, and after he used Dumbledore’s spell, didn’t bother to ring the doorbell or knock on the door, he simply grabbed the knob and tried to turn it, only to find it had been locked. He didn’t turn a hair and took out his wand:

Alohomora

The door clicked open and Snape strode inside, seeing no one in the living room he yelled out:

“Potter, get your stupid Gryffindor self in here now!”

Meanwhile Dobby had apparated to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, his instructions were to find the Auror on duty. After a polite, but hurried question, he was directed to the office of Senior Auror Travis Biller. Dobby introduced himself as Harry Potter’s elf (Biller’s eyes shot right up when he heard that) and gave Biller the note:

Dear Auror,

Please help me, I’m in trouble. There’s a wizard in my house, Severus Snape, he’s yelling at my nephew and threatening him with his wand, my husband and I are muggles and we can’t help him. Please hurry.

Petunia Dursley

Biller reacted immediately, after the fiasco last summer it was standing orders that anything to do with Harry Potter be acted on immediately. Biller ran out of his office:

“Graham, Westbrook front and center, we have a Potter emergency, MOVE!”

Rob Graham and Sarah Westbrook ran into the room and assembled in front of Biller and a very wide-eyed Dobby.

“Ok Dobby, are they still at the address in Surrey?”

“Yes sir Mr. Biller, the same house and everything.”

Biller grabbed a cricket bat that was clearly a Port-key and the other aurors grabbed on. He looked at Dobby, who nodded and popped back to Privet Drive, right at the front door. Biller activated the Port-key and the three Aurors disappeared.

One Minute earlier:

Winky did her task and popped out to the back hedge, there she saw Harry's allies: Peter Tyson, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, and George, Fred, Bill, and Charlie Weasley. She nodded fearfully, the expression on her face was all they needed and they silently ran up to the kitchen door, which was already ajar, done by Dudley at Harry's request. Fred and George led the way, and they all assembled in the kitchen, joining a clearly frightened Dursley family as they listened to Harry and Snape yell at each other. Fred and George were next to Dudley, and motioned to him that everything would be ok. Dudley looked around at seven very tense wizards, who all had their wands drawn, and decided that if he wasn't safe now he never would be. He looked at his parents and silently communicated that message to them, they nodded and looked less afraid (no they don't have ESP or telepathy, you can do a lot with facial expressions and body language). George stared hard at Dudley for a few seconds and seemed to come to a decision, he conjured a beater bat, and

offered it to Dudley. Dudley took the bat without hesitation, this was his home, he wanted to defend it.

Back to the Living Room: One minute ago

Nothing happened after Snape's yell, he repeated it:

"Potter, in here NOW! Or I swear I'll deduct 200 points from Gryffindor the first day of classes."

This got a response out of Harry (not that he cared about points in the grand scheme of things), he walked downstairs, wand in his back pocket, right where Moody said not to put it, but stealth was more important here. He was really going to enjoy this.

"What are you doing here? I thought we told you that you weren't welcome in this house!"

"Do you honestly think that the Headmaster or I care about what you think Potter? So like your dead daddy, thinking that everyone should bow and scrape to your whims."

"Don't you dare talk about my father, he was 10 times the wizard you've ever been, Death Eater."

"Yet somehow I managed to be alive right now and he's rotting in a grave....a grave that you're not even allowed to visit."

It took every ounce of self control for Harry not to pull out his wand and yell out Avada Kedavra, he wasn't sure if it would work, his Cruciatus hadn't been very good, but it would shut Snape up at least. He concentrated on the fact that he needed Snape NOT to shut up, at least until the Aurors got here. He mentally counted the seconds, it must have been at least a minute, they should be here any second now.

"Be that as it may Snivellus, you are not welcome here, so told by the owners of this house. Leave now."

“As if I would stoop so low as to accept orders from muggle trash like your family, they must be scum if the same bloodline bore you!”

“Get Out!”

“The Headmaster has insisted that I waste your time by teaching you Occlumency Potter, if you had learned it last term your hound might still be licking his fleas.”

Snape really knew what buttons to push didn't he?

“I'll never let you teach me anything, if you call your incompetence 'teaching'”

“Sit down Potter and we will begin this.”

“Are you deaf? Get your oily head out of here!”

“If you do not sit down, I'll force you to Potter, it will give me great pleasure.”

Harry was roaring with laughter on the inside, this pensieve memory would be perfect for DMLE use, this couldn't have gone better if he'd written Snape's script for him.

“I'll never again do anything you say, if you think I'm going to let you into my mind you're crazy.”

“Very well, if you insist.” He raised his wand and shouted:

Petrificus Totalus

There was only one problem, Harry had dodged out of the way, and was standing four feet to the left of where he had been before. Snape looked furious, cursing that old fool Dumbledore for putting him through this torture. He decided to up the ante:

Stupefy

Harry ducked this time and did a roll on the floor, the spell making a large black mark on the living room wall. Snape took advantage of Harry being on the ground and fired again, just grazing his leg and sending him to the floor. Snape walked up to Harry, as the lad was quickly rubbing his now numb leg.

“And now I have you Potter, I’m so going to enjoy this.....I’ve been waiting for this moment for years.” He raised his wand:

Re-----

But he raised his wand just a bit too leisurely, Harry had spent a week practicing his quick draw technique, hoping for just such a moment, he let the hate flow through him and give him even faster reflexes:

EXPELLIARMUS!

Snape was just one meter away and was hit dead in the chest.....

WHAM!

Snape flew back three meters and crashed against the wall next to the kitchen door. Harry quickly leapt up and fired again:

PERCUSSIO!

The percussion hex hit Snape just where Harry intended, on his right shoulder.....the same side of his body as his wand arm.....not that he had his wand anymore, it was lying on the floor next to Harry, who hadn’t tried to catch it as it flew toward him. He had just two more spells to use:

Wrappendo!

Magical ropes flew out of his wand and wrapped themselves around Snape, binding him very tightly. Harry picked up the wand at his feet and snapped it in half.....and then walked over to Snape and stuck the pieces carefully up Snape’s nose. He then drew his wand and smiled large:

Rictusempra

Snape was only barely conscious, but started twitching anyway. Harry just stood there panting, and looked to the door, wondering where the Aurors were.....and speak of the devil.

The door burst open, and Travis Biller, Sarah Westbrook, and Rob Graham ran into the house. Biller didn't even look at what was going on before yelling.

"Ministry of Magic, I want everyone to put their wands on the floor.....Immediately!"

Harry put his wand slowly and carefully on the floor, the tip pointed at himself, and held his hands in the air in muggle fashion. Snape was still only semi-conscious on the floor and twitching. Biller looked around and saw Harry standing there, he easily noticed the mark on the wall and the one on the floor. He walked over to Snape and looked him over.....and did his professional best not to smile (it worked, but only barely).

"Harry, my name is Travis Biller, I'm the Senior Auror on duty tonight, we came as soon as we got your message. What happened here Harry? For Merlin's sake put your hands down."

Harry put his hands to his sides and tried to catch his breath. The 40 seconds he was dodging Snape's spells and firing back seemed like 10 minutes. He took a series of deep breaths as the three Aurors all stared at him.

"Snape came into my house, without knocking I might add since the door was locked, to supposedly give me Occlumency lessons. My family sent a note to him yesterday telling him very clearly that he was not welcome here, but he came in anyway. I repeatedly told him to leave, but he refused, and mocked the deaths of my father and godfather in the process. When I refused to sit down for his 'lessons' he started shooting spells at me, one Petrificus Totalus and two Stupefys if I remember correctly. I was busy dodging them so I might be wrong. He grazed me with the last stunner and let his guard down,

that's when I responded. I used one disarming charm, one percussion hex, and the tickling charm that's on him right now.....I did that to try and distract him from any wandless magic that he might be capable of. You came in ten seconds after I used the tickling charm." Biller, Graham, and Westbrook just stood there in shock, and were not a little impressed. .

"Harry, I was under the impression that you are over a year away from your majority.....and I don't see any Ministry owls here. How is it that you used magic?"

"I was emancipated this afternoon, I have the document if you would like to see it, signed by the Minister."

"Yes please I would." Harry had the document (he had copied it a couple more times that afternoon) in the other back pocket of his jeans and he gave it to Biller, who quickly read it over, and recognized Fudge's signature.

"This looks legitimate, but we had better check anyway. Sarah, go back to the Ministry and make sure there was no underage magic warning alarms going off for this house. I don't see any of their owls in here, but make sure anyway."

Sarah nodded and walked outside to apparate to the Ministry.

"Don't get the idea that I don't believe you Harry, we just have to make sure." He then turned to Snape, Graham's wand had never left the now fully conscious Potions professor (the tickling charm had not been a powerfully cast one, and had largely worn off). Biller had always hated this man, the 35 year old former Gryffindor had been a target of Snape and his Slytherin cronies while he was at Hogwarts. Like everyone in the Auror Command he knew that Snape was a former Death Eater who had somehow regained Dumbledore's trust, and a job at Hogwarts. Biller had no children, the reason he was on duty tonight, and was glad that he would never have to send any of his progeny to a Hogwarts staffed by Snape. He pointed his wand at him, and was rewarded with a look of fear:

Finite Incantatem

The magical ropes disappeared, and though Snape could barely move his right side, he managed to bring himself up to a sitting position, as well as remove the wand pieces from his nose.

“Ok Snape, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I am here by order of Headmaster Dumbledore to teach this fool Occlumency, I didn’t want to, but I did as I was instructed.” He even looked a bit smug at that, as if saying that would solve his problems.....he hadn’t fully heard the part about Harry saying he was legal now, and assumed that the Aurors were here to arrest Harry.

“And.....? That’s it? Dumbledore ordered you here, so you illegally entered a locked house that you were previously told you weren’t welcome in and then proceed to fire curses at a defenseless kid who didn’t have his wand out?”

“I am here under Headmaster Dumbledore’s orders. The brat wouldn’t sit down for his lesson so I attempted to force him to, and then he attacked me and snapped my wand, I’m pressing full charges.”

For his own part, Harry just stood there fascinated at this exchange, was this really Snape’s defense? Be arrogant and dismissive and count on the old man to rescue him? Sarah Westbrook entered the open door, she walked up to the group:

“Travis, no instances of underage magic have been reported for this house. The last magic performed here before tonight happened this afternoon, a series of spells by an adult wizard.” Harry raised a hand acknowledging that it was he who had used the spells.

“Thank you Sarah. Well Harry....” Biller took a minute to think....“Where are your relatives? Can they confirm this letter you sent?”

“Yes sir they can. Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon! Could you come out here please!” Biller handed back the paper and motioned to Harry

that he could pick up his wand.....and Snape's eyes went as wide as dinner plates.

In the kitchen Peter motioned Petunia and Vernon to go to the living room, they were needed to put the final nail into the coffin of Severus Snape. They had listened the sound of spells hitting the floor and walls, but no cries from Harry and no words of triumph from Snape, so they knew Harry was getting out of the way. Fred and George had quickly handed out Extendable Ears, even the Dursleys used them once they were shown how. They heard Harry fire off his spells, and the snap of Snape's wand. They then heard Biller and his group come in the door and the discussion that followed.

Petunia and Vernon walked into the living room and immediately noticed the black marks on the wall and floor (they were so large it was hard to miss them), as well as the injured wizard on the floor. They looked at Harry, who was none the worse for wear, having caught his breath.

"Hello, I'm Vernon Dursley, this is my wife Petunia, Harry's Aunt." They shook hands all around (not Snape of course) and Biller introduced himself and his crew.

"Mr. Dursley, where were you when this was going on?"

"Umm.....well we were hiding Mr. Biller, we knew that that man was coming and we wanted to stay out of the way.....we're not wizards you know, we wouldn't know how to defend ourselves from him. Harry hasn't painted that nice a picture of the man.....as you can see. Harry wanted us to stay out of the fray, and we agreed."

"Harry said that you all sent a letter to Snape, telling him not to come here. Is this true?"

"Yes sir it is, though I think that the letter was addressed to Dumbledore as well as this man. We all signed it, even Dudley and Harry. We didn't want him here and we still don't."

"Was the door locked Mr. Dursley?"

“Yes Mr. Biller it was, we always lock our doors at night.”

“Mrs. Dursley, is there anything you would like to add?”

“No sir, its how my husband and nephew said.....we were listening at the door after you came in, and we know what he told you.”

Biller looked around at the people in the room, it was obvious as to what had happened, he just wanted a minute to consider how to do his next actions. This was going to be huge, the arrest of a Hogwarts professor for attacking Harry Potter. Unbeknownst to him and the others, Winky was hidden behind a window outside taking pictures with Peter’s camera, as she had since Snape had started firing spells.

He took the end piece of Snape’s wand and pointed his own at it:

Priori Incantatem!

The spells Snape used to attack Harry quickly came out, as well as the spell to open the door and the one to disable the Blood Protection.....which was all the Auror needed to see.

“Well it’s clear that the law was broken here, and its just as clear that you fired first Snape.....Mr. and Mrs. Dursley are you pressing a complaint against Snape here?”

“Yes sir we are, we want him prosecuted to the fullest extent of your law,” Vernon answered.

“Harry, what about you? Are you making a complaint at him for attacking you? You’re willing to testify against him at the Wizengamot?”

“Yes Mr. Biller I am, I want him in Azkaban for what he did. I’m not even safe in my own home.”

That was all Biller needed to hear, he turned to a still sneering Snape:

“Severus Snape you are under arrest for unlawful entry into a muggle residence and assault on a person who you believed was unable or

not allowed to use magic. If convicted of both these charges you may receive 10 years in prison. Anything you'd like to say?"

"Are you crazy! There is no way that brat is legally an adult! I want him arrested now!"

"Harry Potter is now a legal adult Snape, he has the paperwork, and there are no owls to scold him or other Aurors here to arrest him. Do you have anything relevant you'd like to say?"

"Dumbledore will have me out of your control before the night is over, this is not the last of this."

"Not on my watch Snape. Harry, do you need any of us to stay here with you? Do you feel safe enough now that he's being taken away?" Harry didn't get a chance to answer that question, as the front door was opened by a wizard for the third time in less than fifteen minutes.

Flashback to the minutes previous:

Outside the Dursley home, Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt had watched all of this go down with a mounting sense of confusion. They saw Snape enter the house unbidden, and each of them sighed, as this was not the right start to the session. They knew about the letter to Dumbledore and Snape, demanding that Snape not come tonight.....and while

both of them fully agreed with Harry (who they felt had put the muggles up to writing it), they knew that Dumbledore would do what he wanted, and that would be to dismiss it. They heard the insults and they crept closer to the house, and then they heard the breaking point: Snape's Petrificus Totalus. They were under orders from the old man not to intervene in the lesson, but this was beyond the pale:

"Ok Tonks, get back to Headquarters and tell Dumbledore what happened, get him over here, I'll make sure Snape doesn't actually harm the kid."

Tonks nodded and ran to the Apparation point, then disappeared, just getting out before a muggle car came into view.

Tonks burst into the front parlor of Grimmauld Place and screamed:

“Dumbledore!”

The entire house came streaming into the parlor, Molly in the lead, she grabbed Tonks:

“What happened, is Harry ok, what did that man do to him?”

Dumbledore came up to Tonks and much more calmly asked her what happened.

“Snape and Harry started yelling at each other as soon as Snape walked into the house.....and then he took out his wand and started firing curses at Harry.” There was a hushed silence as they waited for Dumbledore’s reaction.....well not everybody, Molly lost the tiny amount of composure that she had left (and she rarely had a lot to begin with lately):

“I told you not to send Snape in there, you knew something like this was going to happen eventually! I swear, if anything happens to Harry you will regret it for the rest of your short life!” Ron and Ginny froze immediately, their mother had just threatened to kill Dumbledore.

For reasons passing understanding, Dumbledore ignored Molly, and didn’t even take his wand out.

He closed his eyes and said a quiet prayer, fully expecting that he would soon find a dead body of some sort. Without opening his eyes, or even acknowledging what Molly had said, he spoke:

“Don’t say it Remus, yes you told us so. Let’s just get over there and fix this. Its obvious Harry panicked somehow and Severus took something he said the wrong way. Kids (he looked at Ginny, Ron, and Hermione), you come too, maybe you can talk to Harry better than we can.”

He summoned two brooms (ones for sweeping) from the closet and made them into port-keys. The 10 of them (Dumbledore, Remus,

Hermione, four Weasleys, Hestia, Tonks, and Moody) grabbed on to the brooms and vanished at a command from Dumbledore.

Kingsley watched the battle inside unfold with an unreal sense that he was at some Quidditch match. He saw Snape down Harry.....and was amazed at Harry's quick draw response. He let out some laughs as Harry did his thing with Snape's wand.....and then he saw his Auror colleagues appear, and the subsequent conversation, all the while wondering if he should intervene at some point.....but he eventually decided to do nothing until Dumbledore got there, cursing them for taking so long.

They soon appeared outside Privet Drive, and Kingsley threw off his invisibility cloak to go meet them.

"Come with us Kingsley, let us see what has happened here." Dumbledore looked very tired at that moment Remus thought. He was privately ecstatic at the mess Snape had caused, and he was probably going to get himself arrested to boot. Dumbledore would have a hard time covering this up, whatever it was.

They filed up to the door and Dumbledore entered the unlocked door, he found Harry and the Dursleys talking to the Aurors,

End Flashback

Harry saw the robes and white beard and whipped out his wand, screaming out:

"Stay where you are! If you move one meter further into this house I will attack you! And I will fight to kill!"

The Order members and youngsters stood crowded in the doorway as they clearly heard what Harry said, but just as clearly could not believe their ears. Dumbledore saw the look of pure hatred on Harry's face and wisely decided not to move, but Harry hadn't said that he couldn't speak.

"Harry, put your wand down, you are underage and cannot use it." Harry saw the group behind the old man, but not all of the people who

it consisted of, and said his next salvo loudly enough for them to hear:

“As of 5 pm today I am a legal adult, signed, sealed, and delivered. Your best friend attacked me and I took him down easier than I could any first year Hufflepuff.....don’t test me old man!” He took out his emancipation form and banished it right at Dumbledore, who took notice that the Aurors weren’t doing anything to stop Harry.....who noticed them as well.

“Mr. Biller, this man has come here to kidnap me, I formally request your protection and your help in removing him from this property, he is not welcome here, as you have heard in detail.” This was news to most of Dumbledore’s group, as he had not shared the existence of the ‘stay away Snape’ note with most of the Order.....all of whom were still processing Harry’s emancipation and the fact that he sounded like murdering Dumbledore was next on his to-do list.

Travis had no clue of what to do here, he had no love for the Headmaster, but the guy was the Head of the Wizengamot.....but laws were laws, and Dumbledore was not above them, and Harry could not have made his request with any less ambiguousness.

“Headmaster, a check of Snape’s former wand indicates that he did attack Harry first, using one Petrificus Totalus and two stunning spells, and I can confirm from his own statements that he was under the impression that Harry could not fire back.” Oh this was just wonderful, thought Dumbledore. He needed a moment to think though, and threw out a delaying question.

“His former wand?” Harry handled that one:

“I snapped it after I almost put him through the wall. You should teach your pets about overconfidence. I told you, I warned you: Don’t send him here! But you did, and look what happened. I’m pressing charges, maybe Snape can teach Potions via owl post from Azkaban.....I thought I told you not to move Dumbledore!” The old man had in fact moved, due largely to Molly and Remus pushing their ways forward. Molly got a look at the scene, and looked set to try to go to Harry (to

embrace him, not to attack him), except for one small detail.....Harry hadn't lowered his wand an inch., it was still pointed at the doorway and those in it.

"I have had it with you people trying to run my life! Though it wouldn't be so bad if you hadn't all made such a botch of it! Leave!" Molly's mouth closed, and Remus just stood there looking sad.

"Harry, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I am Remus, I'm sorry that you couldn't have been there for me when I really needed you."

That was like a slap in the face to Remus, but he managed to respond in soft tones like before:

"Are you sure the water isn't over your head?"

"No Remus, the water is exactly at my head."

Remus turned and walked back to the door, and once outside the anti-apparition zone, popped away.

Finally Dumbledore couldn't take the silence anymore:

"So what has happened here Harry? Why was it necessary to attack Professor Snape, to have him arrested?"

Harry glared at Dumbledore, but said in a quiet (and very hate filled) tone of voice, "I told you he wasn't welcome here Professor. We (he motioned at his aunt and uncle) even wrote it down for you so there would be no doubt of our wishes. Snape knew about the note, so I know you got it."

"Professor Snape Harry. Yes, we did get your note. However your need to learn Occlumency is more important than your dislike for Professor Snape or your relatives disdain for our kind."

"I'll call him professor when he earns his title. I repeat, I don't want him here, they don't want him here. Period. I told him to leave and he

attacked me. Surely even you can't overlook the curse marks you see. He thought I could not fire back, but he still attacked me. You have some kind of ridiculous trust in him, but I don't. Be grateful I didn't kill him.....and if I hadn't sent for the Aurors, I could easily have ended him.....and if they weren't here its not out of the question that I could have gotten the drop on you too, and who knows what might have happened." Dumbledore went visibly white at hearing that, and it took considerable self-control on his part not to draw his wand on his young charge.

"Harry, may I please come in and talk with you." The old man knew that this was beyond salvaging, at least for tonight, so he geared the rest of his performance to the people standing behind him.

"No you may not. I have no interest in hearing anything you have to say, and you've proven that you have just as little interest in listening to me, if past events are any indication. Leave now, I will not say it again."

"All right Harry, if you insist. I hope you will change your mind soon, it appears as though we have much to discuss."

"Says you, we're finished Dumbledore. Oh yeah, Ron? Hermione? I hope you like being a couple, it was so nice of you to tell me about it." Ron and Hermione were in the middle of the crowd behind Dumbledore, and in fact were not holding hands or showing any outward affection, they were still too stunned.....the more so because they wondered how Harry had known about them.

Biller took a deep breath, and turned to Graham and Westbrook.

"Rob, Sarah, please escort the Headmaster and his companions off the property (another deep breath).....if any of them resist, arrest them." Dumbledore and his people took the hint and backed out the door, all of them trying to get a last glimpse of Harry.....and then immediately wishing they hadn't, as his wand was still pointed at them.

The adults in the group all congregated in the Dursley driveway, but Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were still on the stoop. Ginny had motioned the other two to stop, and called out to Harry.

"Harry, what's wrong? Can we please talk with you?" Harry walked to the doorway, with Biller at his side. The hate had left his face, and he was looking very tired, his wand no longer directly pointed at them, but still not pointed downward.

"Not right now Ginny, I'm sorry. I hope you can understand eventually."

"Please let us help you."

"I wish you three hadn't have been caught in the middle of this, if the middle is truly where you are right now." Ron had rarely looked more insulted, while Hermione just looked troubled. Ginny remained their spokesperson:

"You've obviously been planning this for awhile Harry, why couldn't you trust us to tell us about it?"

There was enough anger still burning in Harry that part of him wanted to go into great detail about why he couldn't trust the three of them (as opposed to his crew, still hiding in the kitchen).....however, Harry knew that he was not out of the woods yet tonight, and didn't dare give the old man any insight into what might be coming next.

"That's a conversation for another time Ginny, now its time for you and the lovebirds to go back to Dumbledore's lair, where he can ask you some pointless questions about what I might be up to. If it means anything to you, I'm sorry it had to be like this." He turned and walked back into the house. The three kids, seeing as there was nothing else to be done, walked over to Dumbledore.....who had rather obviously been listening to the exchange. The only two people not grabbing on to the (regular) brooms were Tonks and Kingsley.

"Look Travis, we need to stay here to watch over the place, to make sure no Death Eaters decide to drop by."

“That’s acceptable, as long as you don’t set one toe on the Dursley property Kingsley, you heard what the kid said. However, if you really want to take him on, just walk back into the house, I’ll send word ahead to St. Mungos for you.”

“C’mon Travis, we’re trained Aurors, however much muggle torture experience Snape has had, taking him out is not the same as dealing with one of us.” Travis looked at Tonks with some exasperation.

“Tonks, the thing to remember about Harry Potter, and I say this having met the kid 15 minutes ago: No one in the world knows just what he is capable of magically. You and your little Order have obviously done something to piss him off, and I highly advise you not to provoke him right now. Our government is dealing with enough issues right now without the Boy Who Lived being involved in yet another duel against a government official meaning to do him harm. I am the ranking Auror on site, and I’m officially forbidding the two of you to enter that house or interact with him in any way unless he initiates contact with you first. I want to hear a verbal acknowledgement from both of you.”

An acknowledgement which they both reluctantly gave. Biller was the third ranking person in the DMLE, behind only Amelia Bones and Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, and Azkaban was full of Dark Wizards and Witches that he had put there. After Dumbledore’s group was gone, he went back into the House, passing Rob and Sarah, who were escorting Snape out the door. Travis ‘accidentally’ bumped Snape on his injured shoulder, and had a happy moment when the grease ball winced in pain.

“Harry, if you want some free advice, get lost. Dumbledore will probably be back here very soon.”

“Five more minutes Mr. Biller, and I’ll never see this house again. Thank for you everything tonight.”

“You’re welcome Harry, the DMLE will let you know about Snape’s trial, assume it will happen sometime early next week, it won’t be that complicated a trial. If Shacklebolt or Tonks come near you, send your House Elf to come get me again, and I’ll take care of them.” He said

goodbye to the Dursleys, and walked back outside. The three Aurors made sure that Kingsley and Tonks were not on the Dursley property, and apparated away with Snape.

Harry ran into the kitchen and saw his friends waiting for him. The four Weasleys were all leaning against the kitchen counter, with Luna, Dudley, and Neville sitting at the table. Peter was coming in the back door, he had been doing a scan outside. Harry's grin could be seen in Bristol, it was that large.

"Did everyone hear the show?" The tension in the room had long been released once they realized that a battle wasn't going to be taking place, so there were some easy smiles. Peter walked over and patted Harry on the back. After politely asking Dudley to go wait with his parents, and throwing a Silencing Charm at the kitchen door:

"That was masterful Harry, you did everything just fine."

"Thank God the Aurors got here when they did, I guess there were some Order people outside, they must have tipped him."

"We were ready, just in case." Bill nodded at Peter's statement, and started to smile.

"I think it was much better that Dumbledore didn't know about us, it will be harder for him to predict things if he thinks it's just you calling the shots instead of a committee advising you."

"Anything that keeps him off balance is fine with me, and it only has to last a week.....but now I've got to get out of here, he'll be back any minute." Peter took a small book out of his pocket.

"This is a portkey that I got from.....well that I got from a reliable source that I do business with a lot. It will take you right to Room 214 of the Sheraton Hotel in London, the room that we have reserved for you. I sent an owl off today to Great Lakes, I should hear back from them sometime tomorrow or Sunday. All I told them is that I had a client who was interested in transferring from Hogwarts, and was under some security concerns.....which doesn't flat out tell them who it is, but narrows the list down considerably." Bill took over:

“Now ideally we would like two of us to go with him and stay there tonight. There is very little chance that the old man can track him there, but we can’t risk otherwise. Fred, George, it can’t be you. Once Dumbledore finds out that he’s not here, and moreover has taken all his things with him, your shop is probably the second place he’ll look, after The Burrow. Unfortunately Dumbledore knows where I live, so that will be a place they might look too, and I don’t dare deny him access, I don’t want to make them too suspicious.” Neville stood up.

“I’ll go, I kind of figured that we might be doing something like this, so Gran knows that I might not be coming home tonight.” Charlie cleared his throat too.

“I’ll be the other, we need the other person to be able to use their wand in a fight, and I’m pretty good with alarm and surveillance charms.” Peter handed Harry the book, and sent Dobby to collect Harry’s things, he would meet them there.

“Winky!” She popped in.

“Yes Peter sir, the pictures are all taken, I got a good look at all the spells being fired. I used five rolls of film sir.”

“Terrific, you come with me, we have a trip to make to the Daily Prophet, they don’t go to press for another two hours. The rest of you, head back home, we’ll meet in Harry’s hotel room tomorrow afternoon.”

Harry went up to all of them and hugged them in thanks, obviously enjoying Luna’s the most (and mildly chastising himself for letting Neville get there first). Soon all had left but Harry, Neville, Charlie, and the Dursleys. Charlie sat the muggles down on the living room sofa, one last thing needed to be done.

“Now I need all three of you to be very still for a moment. I need to remove the memories of a few things from your minds. This will not hurt one bit, and will throw Dumbledore off our trail, ok? I am very good at this kind of thing, so there is no need to worry.”

There were a lot of aspects to this business that all three of them wanted to forget, but they knew that Charlie wasn't going to go that far. Before the redhead could begin though, Harry walked in front of Vernon and Petunia and squatted down to face them.....for the last time.

"I know we've been sort of getting along the last few weeks, but that does not excuse the fact that you physically and verbally abused me for fourteen years, all over something that I had control over whatsoever. Right now you're more afraid of me than of Dumbledore, but that might change, you might be tempted to tell him things, give him insight into what I might be doing. Someday Voldemort might come by here, and want to know a few things.....Just know this Vernon, Petunia: I hate you both, I hate you just as much as I hate Dumbledore, for the childhood that I was never allowed to have. Do I need to remind you to forget about me? Because I will not forget, not for one second." Harry stood up and motioned Neville to go into the kitchen with him, while Charlie did his work.

"Harry, are you ok mate?"

"I'll be fine Neville, leaving this house forever will make a lot of things better."

"Is it forever, or are you coming back to settle with them?"

"No Neville, it's forever.....I won't give them the satisfaction of becoming like them." Charlie came into the kitchen at that point.

"It's done, let's get out of here." They took hold of the book, and at the command, disappeared. Tonks and Kingsley noticed fifteen minutes later that there were no wizards in the house.

Number 12 Grimmauld Place

8 pm

The Order members sat at the kitchen table and waited for Dumbledore to come into the room, he was currently in the living room having a heated argument with Amelia Bones, who had just

found out about Snape's arrest from Biller, and was giving Dumbledore all kinds of flack for what had happened. The old man was all but begging her to release Snape to his custody, but she was having none of it. There were no Extendable Ears being used by those in the kitchen, just an open doorway and Dumbledore's own uncharacteristically loud voice.

He soon entered the room, and immediately focused on the three teenagers.

"Kids, I know from your conversation with Harry that you did not know that he was planning anything, but think back to his letters, to the train ride, was there an inkling?" Hermione had been doing nothing but thinking of this for the last 40 minutes.

"No sir, I can't recall anything, and I've been trying. Harry was distant in his letters, but I really just chalked that up to grief over Sirius. I assumed he would come around eventually, especially after seeing how wonderfully he did on his OWL's." Ron and Ginny agreed with this assessment as well. Remus had a hard question to ask, but one that needed to be:

"If Harry had let you in on his plans, would you have told us?" Ron looked very conflicted, but Ginny, then Hermione, found this easy to answer.

"No Remus, I don't think I would have."

"I agree with Ginny. I'm sorry, but I could never betray Harry, not even to you Headmaster. I would have tried to talk him out of it, but that's all. Ron?" Ron looked on the verge of tears, he was cursing himself for not making a bigger effort to stay behind, with or without the two girls.

"He's never really forgiven me for 4th year, that's where this is coming from. I guess I don't blame him really. I know this, whatever you try to do to stop him, I won't help you." Hermione and Ginny were in agreement with this as well. Remus continued to look sad, and ran his hands through his hair.

"I'm sorry Albus, but I'm with the kids on this one. I would not have betrayed him either. You left him alone for too long, both last year and this year, and that has allowed his resentment to fester.....and now its festered into hate."

"I was only trying to do what was best for him, to protect him." Arthur didn't like the idea of jumping on Dumbledore as well, but he felt the need to get his views on the record.

"But you didn't protect him Albus, not really. Harry is alive right now due to a combination of good genes, a ton of luck, and outstanding Quidditch reflexes.....nothing you have given to him or taught him. Right now you need to take a few steps back from Harry and see if the rest of us can fix this."

"There is nothing to fix Arthur, in a few days Harry will calm down and things will be back to normal. We'll figure out a way to keep him protected away from Privet Drive, something that I admit I should have taken more seriously before." Remus couldn't believe that Dumbledore had missed the point by such a wide margin.

"He doesn't want your protection Albus, you either give him too little when he's at school or too much when he's not."

"It's not about what Harry wants or is comfortable with Remus, we need to think about what is best for our society as a whole. And in reality he does not know what he wants. I will admit that we have not handled Harry as well as we probably could have, but nothing has happened that's irreversible." Remus was now on the verge of walking out of this room for good, if that's how far it had gone. There was one last thing to find out though.

"What are the details of the Prophecy Albus, how does it detail Harry's role?" Everyone in the room leaned forward to hear the answer, not that they thought it would be a straight one.

"That is between Harry and myself, you don't need to know the details."

“What a surprise, and yes we do need to know the details. The loyalties of the people in this room are beyond question (these are the same people who comprised Dumbledore’s group at Privet Drive, minus Tonks and Kingsley), and everyone of us risked their lives to safeguard what it contained. Add that to the likelihood that whatever you told Harry about it probably put him on the path he’s traveling now. We need to square things with Harry Albus, and I mean right now.....and we need all the information we can to make that happen. We know he’s the final weapon, it would be helpful to know how.”

“Harry will come around, I’m sure of it. The best play right now is to let his anger dissipate.”

“You’re betting all of our lives on that, you realize this don’t you?”

“I’m right Remus, you have to trust me on this.” There was a note of finality to the old man’s voice that the werewolf knew all too well. He threw up his hands (literally) and went quiet. Dumbledore stood up and made to leave.

“I’m going to return to Hogwarts now and see if our tracking charms will give us any clues, though I’m sure Harry removed them. I will see you all tomorrow, good night.” With a sweep of his robes, he left the kitchen. They could hear the floo fire and he was gone. Hestia and Moody said their goodnights as well, leaving the kids with Remus, Molly, and Arthur. Remus went to the living room and looked around. He didn’t find what he was looking for and returned to the kitchen, whispering in Arthur’s ear. They took out their wands and in unison, cried out:

Accio Albus Dumbledore!

But nothing happened, the old man was truly gone from the house.

“Molly, if you would please, go get to the floo and get the twins, if anyone in the Order knew what was going on with Harry before tonight, it’s them.” She left the room.

"You think they helped him? What would they know about the emancipation process?"

"Moral support Hermione, no matter how he seemed tonight, Harry had to trust someone with his plans. The three of you have various marks against you with Harry: Ron's jealousy, Ginny's crush, and your idolization of Dumbledore Hermione. The twins have no such marks, and the shop situation makes them even more loyal to him. Plus, they are the most devious good people I know of, and they would be an asset to him for that fact alone."

"Do you think he just walked into Fudge's office and said 'hey, let me be an adult.'?"

"He could have done exactly that Ron, and I doubt Fudge wasted five seconds thinking about it before signing on the dotted line. He had to have known it would tie Albus into a knot." They mulled this over for a few minutes until Molly returned with Fred and George. Arthur stared hard at his twin sons, the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that Remus' theory was correct.

"All right you two, what do you know and when did you know it?" Fred and George just stood there, and Fred shrugged.

"Know what Dad?"

"Don't play with us guys, this is important. What is Harry up to? We need to know." The twins looked at each other for a moment, they had known all along that this was coming, and what they were about to say had been okayed by Harry and Bill.

"Maybe you do, but that's not our call to make. Your problem, and we agree that you do have one, is with Harry, and you need to wait until he's ready to talk with you.....if he ever is."

"Is it that far gone, he hates us that much?" George sighed, and Fred started pacing as he answered.

"He doesn't hate you lot Dad, for Merlin's sake, he loves all of you.....he just doesn't trust you as far as he can throw you, and I

don't see anything that will change that. The mere fact that you're sitting here in this room right now is proof of that. He sees you as Dumbledore's people, and we can certainly acknowledge that he hates Dumbledore. From his vantage point, the only difference between you and the Death Eaters is that you won't torture him and they will."

"I agree with George folks, you would have to kill Dumbledore in front of Harry to make this right."

"Yet he trusts you two."

"Yes he does, and we've said as much as we can and still keep that trust. We knew what was going down tonight, yes, but we know very little of what's coming next.....just in case Dumbledore decides to do some Legilimancy on us. I'll tell you a couple of things: One, Harry is not going Dark; and two: You can't stop what's coming next, so don't even try." Molly tried next, but was taken aback at how serious both of her sons sounded.

"Fred, George, we're your parents, you need to tell us what is going on."

"I'm sorry Mum, but no we don't need to do that. You love Harry like a son, he knows that.....but you're here in this kitchen, doing Dumbledore's bidding." Hermione had been surprisingly quiet, but had a question.

"Do you know the Prophecy?" They were prepared for this as well.

"No we don't, and we don't want to know. Harry volunteered to tell us, but we wouldn't have it. Some things need to remain a secret." This was the most serious lie the twins had ever told their parents, but their word was their word.

"He's not returning to Hogwarts, is he?" George let out a sigh, and Fred had a faint smile on his face as he answered:

"Put yourself in his position Remus, put yourself in his life.....would you go back there?"

“Now we’ve said all we’re going to say on the subject of Harry to you lot. The best thing you can do for him is to leave him alone and not interfere.”

“I can’t believe you won’t help your own parents.”

“We’re choosing the right path, not the easy one Mum. George and I have watched fate, Voldemort, and Dumbledore mistreat Harry time and time again over the last five years.....it stops now. Goodnight all.” The twins walked to the front door and exited that way. Remus got up and began making some more tea (he preferred doing it the muggle way).

“I think we’ve been put in our place, and I’m not sure that those two aren’t correct.”

“What can we do now? Do we keep helping Dumbledore? Will he let us be neutral in this?” Ginny looked sad and confused, she worshiped the twins and found their new found gravity to be very confusing. Hermione got up to help with the tea.

“I think we should just wait until Snape’s trial, and do nothing until then. By then Harry will have cooled down some, and Professor Dumbledore may be willing to negotiate with him.”

“Will Harry listen to him though?”

“I don’t know Ron.....I don’t know if we really understand Harry anymore. He’s had burdens and pressures that we have never fully grasped, and we know him better than anyone. I think hearing the Prophecy might have made him finally start to crack.” Ginny started to cry at hearing that, and Ron and Hermione weren’t far behind her. This had been an incredibly stressful evening for all six of them, and Molly herded the kids off to bed, While she was upstairs, Remus poured some fire whiskey in his and Arthur’s teacups.

“Do you think he’ll go back to Hogwarts Remus?”

"No I don't Arthur, he'll either go abroad or disappear into the muggle world. I have a good idea of what James and Lily left him, and what Sirius is going to leave him, he can afford to do it if he wants to."

"Will he get this house too? It would be interesting to see if he kicks Albus out of it."

"A nice thought, but it's not going to be that simple. From what Padfoot hinted to me, I'm probably going to get the house.....so I'm the one who will have to make that decision."

"I have to wonder if it's just the twins on his side, he would have needed more help than those two, however devious they are."

"I'm sorry Arthur, but we have to assume that Bill is helping Harry as well, and with Charlie visiting....." he trailed off, the implications being clear to both of them. Both of them, and one can assume Molly as well, had been wondering about Bill ever since his non-appearance at Privet Drive.

"Bill will protect him Remus, better than any of us ever could it seems."

"The look of betrayal on Harry's face when he saw me, I don't know how I can ever face Lily and James when I get to the afterlife. He thinks I chose Dumbledore over him, and I can see how he would."

"What do we do about Dumbledore? Do you think there's anything that will mollify Harry, short of killing the old man like the twins said?"

"No Arthur, I don't think that there is. We just have to let this play out and see what Harry does. Like it or not, we're spectators here."

Saturday, July 28, 1996

The main headline of the Daily Prophet said it all:

Hogwarts Professor Attacks Boy Who Lived! Snape Arrested!

Two of the juiciest photos were on the front page, and fifteen more of Winky's masterpieces were inside, as Peter's hand-fed story to Daily Prophet cub reporter (and Harry's former Quidditch teammate) Alicia Spinnet (the scoop given to her at Harry's request), detailed every second of Snape's attack, Harry's defense, and the subsequent arrest. Detailed histories of Snape and Harry were given, as well as over a dozen anecdotes of their incidents, helpfully provided by Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas, Parvati Patil, and Lavender Brown, who had been contacted on Peter's advice (the only ones really who would have cooperated, besides Neville).

Every issue was sold within minutes, as Prophet Managing Editor Augustus McRae called in a favor at the Wizarding Wireless Network and had their on-air personality Harry Turtledove talk about the article on the air. The presses ran again, and over five hundred copies were printed and immediately sold.

The response was swift and staggering: Over three hundred Howlers were sent to Dumbledore's office in the first hour, with two hundred more arriving by noon, with a few dozen more spread amongst the Hogwarts teachers (even Binns got a few).....not a one of whom liked Severus Snape in the slightest, nor had they ever (and Flitwick, McGonagall, Vector, Binns, and Sprout had known him since he was 11 years old). The Howlers all detailed disgust in allowing Snape near Harry without supervision, and many helpfully included past incidents involving Snape being horrible to somebody. Hogwarts castle was not a quiet place this day, and trickles of Howlers were still coming over three weeks later.

The newspaper article mentioned Harry's emancipation prominently, and it was heavily implied that Harry had been expecting an attack of some sort, but certainly not from one of his teachers, even one who he had never gotten along with. Peter promised the Prophet an interview with Harry in the coming week, to be shared with The Quibbler.....as long as The Daily Prophet's coverage was satisfactory to Harry, Peter reminded them of the hatchet jobs they had run on Harry in the past, they had some proving to do.....but he assured them that Harry was willing to let bygones be bygones. One last condition was that Peter's name never appear in any article concerning Harry, a condition that was readily granted. He could

almost see McRae drooling over the thought of covering a Snape trial with Harry as the prime witness, with Harry talking to the Prophet afterward.

For his own part, Harry had been enjoying some relaxation time. He, Neville, and Charlie had availed themselves of room service at the hotel, and then they had spent a few enjoyable hours watching television and teaching Dobby (and Winky once she got there) how to play poker. Dobby couldn't bluff to save his life, but knew the ins and outs of knowing when to hold them and when to fold them, knowing when to walk away, and when to run.....and he wound up doing the best of the five in the end.

Peter got there around 3 pm, and he had copies of the Daily Prophet for each of them.

"I just stopped by the DMLE, and Snape's trial has been set for Tuesday, at 10 am. I ostensibly was there for business for another client, but the whole place was buzzing about the news, my eavesdropping skills didn't get much of a workout."

"When will I find out officially?"

"Good question. I owled Fudge this morning and asked him to instruct the DMLE to send all notices to you in care of the twins. They had a pointed talk with their parents and Remus last night, so its known that they're in your corner."

"Are they in trouble with them?"

"I'm not entirely sure that they care at this point, but Fred said that no yelling occurred. Charlie, your parents didn't admit to sussing out you and Bill, but they're not stupid, they'll have to be wondering why the two of you weren't anywhere in sight last night."

"I can handle Mum and Dad, don't worry Harry. This isn't Percy redux, they'll understand that."

"I hope so Charlie, I don't want you four sacrificing anything for me. Any word from Great Lakes Peter?"

"That's my other piece of news, I got an owl response from Joanne Murray, the Headmistress there. It turns out she's in Ireland right now doing some traveling, muggle style, so the owl didn't have to go across the Atlantic. She has to go back to Michigan tomorrow, but we've set up a floo appointment where we can talk, at 8 pm this evening."

"Okay, are we going to do this in your office then?"

"WE aren't going to be doing anything quite yet Harry, your name has to be kept out of this, just in case. I'll talk to her and explain the situation, I'm sorry Harry, but if you go there, you'll have to do it blind."

"Fair enough, I can handle that. What should I do in the meantime?"

"Exactly what you've been doing, relaxing and doing nothing. Heck, go for a walk, go out to dinner tonight if you want to, see a movie. Just don't go anywhere near Diagon Alley or the Ministry (Harry's hotel is roughly seven kilometers from Diagon Alley), and use your wand only if you absolutely must. The twins are going to be your backup tonight, and Luna and I will take over tomorrow afternoon."

"That should be interesting, trolling the London nightlife with Fred and George."

"Just don't get anyone pregnant. One last thing, I sent an owl to your Gringott's account manager, requesting that the Black will be read Tuesday morning at 9 am, and I got a return message indicating that the time was fine with him. He will notify Remus and Tonks of the time."

"That's close to the trial time, what if those two try something?"

"The goblins will be all the protection you need, the most powerful anti-apparition wards in Great Britain are in that bank, and make sure that neither of them touch you, we don't want them activating any portkeys. I personally don't think Remus will try to kidnap you, but Tonks is a wild card and we have to be careful."

"It's too bad really, I like her. Now you're not going to be there, right?"

"I will be if you want me to be, I'll be in the courtroom in any case, so my involvement may well be unmasked there."

"Well let's take a chance on that Peter, let's see if we can keep you my secret weapon.....oh yeah, how will I get to Gringott's? Do I dare use The Leaky Cauldron?"

"That won't be necessary. Tomorrow when I come by I'll have a portkey ready for you that will take you to the twins' shop, and you can floo from there."

"You have everything planned out.....I'll always be grateful to your grandmother Neville, she made a very wise choice the day she hired Peter here."

"I'll tell her you said that Harry, you can always count on our family."

"Okay, I'll be off then. Fred and George will be here by six or so, they'll have Lee close the shop down for them. If there's a problem, just have Dobby go get the Aurors." After a round of goodbyes, he popped off to his office. It was a slow day at the shop, so the twins arrived early. Charlie and Neville stuck around though, and the five of them had a fun time dining out and then playing some snooker at a pub that the twins seemed to know rather well. This was Harry's and Neville's first ever night out in London, and the group didn't get back until the wee hours of Sunday morning.

Sunday, July 29, 1996

1:00 pm

Peter and Luna appeared via portkey in Harry's hotel room, only to find their five friends still sleeping (George and Fred had somehow managed to set up hammocks in the middle of the room). Peter was contemplating how to wake them up when Luna simply went over to Neville and stuck her wand up his nose.

“AHHH!” Neville’s cry woke the other four up, as Luna smiled benignly at her boyfriend.

“Good afternoon boys, time to rise and shine.” After a few ‘what the heck is going on here’ comments, the guys did get up.

“Get some clothes on you lot, we’ll go out for some lunch after I give you some news.”

“How did the meeting with Murray go?” Peter didn’t answer immediately, but instead fished in his pocket for a moment, pulling out a small envelope.

“The meeting could not have gone better Harry, and afterward she sent me this for you. Read it, and we’ll talk.” Harry opened the plain white envelope, and found a single sheet of paper with the crest of The Great Lakes Magic Institute. It was dated yesterday.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I hope your day finds you well. After my meeting with your representative on Saturday, July 28th, I am pleased to offer you a place in our junior class at Great Lakes, the junior year being our equivalent to your sixth year. Mr. Tyson is sending us copies of your grades and test results, but based on his verbal description, you should be eligible for most, if not all, the of the junior year classes.

We are located in the middle of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and the nearest international airport to us is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After you book your flight, let us know when it arrives and you will be met by either me or my Deputy Headmaster. Mr. Tyson said that time was a factor, so if you need to do so, we can provide a place to stay for you for the remainder of the summer. Mr. Potter, I will personally guarantee your safety from Albus Dumbledore, you have my word on that.

I look forward to your return owl, and to you attending our school,

Joanne K. Murray

Headmistress

"That must have been some meeting, to elicit this so quickly."

"We talked for about fifteen minutes, it was a surprisingly good connection really, floo connections between England and Ireland aren't the greatest. I filled her in on the pertinent details, and she was fully on board right from the go."

"And you're dead positive that she won't turn me back over to the old man?"

"I am Harry, she will protect you from him. Word will soon get out about you being there, certainly once school starts there. She'll make sure nothing happens. I found out why she and Dumbledore don't get along, and you're going to love it:"

"What?"

"The year before Fred and George here started at Hogwarts, Joanne Murray was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts." A collective:

"WHAT!"

Sounded in the room. Peter let the dumbstruck looks fade from their faces before he continued.

"She was part of an year-long exchange program, two Americans came over here, and Flitwick and McDowell went over there. She and Dumbledore clashed from jump, it continued for the entire school year, and she left Hogwarts with a much greater appreciation of her own school, something she used when she took over as Headmistress four years ago."

"Oh my God."

"I talked to two students who had her for NEWT work, as well as your old friend Oliver Wood, and they all confirm that there was considerable friction between her and the old man. Oliver was in his

second year and even he picked up on it. They all raved about her as a teacher though, and Great Lakes' Defense program is rated as the best in North America. They had no trouble attracting one of the top American Aurors to replace Murray after she was promoted."

Harry didn't say anything right away, he went over to his trunk and rooted in it for a quill and some parchment. He quickly scribbled on it, and handed it to Peter:

Dear Madam Murray,

I am very grateful that you have offered me a place in your school, and your protection from Albus Dumbledore. I accept both of them, and will do my level best to make sure you don't regret your offers.

I have a few things to wrap up here in England this week, but I will schedule my plane flight to the United States to take place as soon as possible. I will let you know the details of my travel as soon as I know them myself.

Your soon to be student,

Harry Potter

"It looks good, I'll send it off with one of my owls tomorrow. We'll save your owl for the flight information. Now I'm guessing it's way too much to hope for that you already have a passport?"

"A bit too much, yeah. Until Hogwarts I'd never been out of England, let alone the country."

"We'll do that tomorrow. You can get them the same day if you're willing to wait all day at the right office. I've already cleared my schedule and we'll go over tomorrow morning, first thing. Once we get that taken care of, we'll book your flight to Wisconsin. It will be pretty expensive, but well within the limit of your credit card.....or did you already exceed the limit?" A nice laugh was had out of that.

"I never touched it last night, I used cash for the meal and for the rest. I'd actually like kind of a quiet day today if you guys don't mind."

“That’s what I had in mind. Twins, Charlie, get back home, and make sure that you check yourselves for tracking charms after come into contact with any Order members.” Soon after, the Weasleys left, with Neville and Luna sticking around so that they could spend some time together. It was a quiet night, with everyone resting before the storms to come on Tuesday.

Tuesday, July 31st, 1996

Gringotts Bank

9 am

Monday had been a dry day for Harry, he spent all day at the passport office, but left there in the late afternoon, passport in his pocket. Peter had phoned the airport and booked Harry on a Thursday morning flight out of Heathrow, destination Milwaukee. On a somewhat surprising note, Dumbledore had been very quiet since Friday night, he had spent all day Monday sequestered in his office at Hogwarts, doing who knows what, but not contacting Grimmauld Place at all during the day and night. Harry wondered if he was going to try and get Snape off on a plea bargain or some other kind of technicality, but Fudge had assured Peter on Saturday that while the Ministry was not opposed to a plea bargain, there would not be an approved one without prison time for Snape being attached to it.

Hermione, Ginny, and Ron all tried to send owls to Harry, but each of them was returned to sender, indicating to all of them that Harry was hiding in the muggle world (post owls would not deliver to the muggle world as a rule, Harry’s Hogwarts’ envelopes got through to Privet Drive because the Dursleys were aware of the magical world). They came up with an alternative plan though, one that took Harry’s group by relative surprise.

Ten minutes before, Harry popped into WWW only to find five people waiting for him instead of two. Fred and George were in the middle of an argument with their siblings and Hermione. Harry immediately drew his wand.

“Don’t get any ideas you three.”

“Sorry mate, they got here just a couple of minutes ago.”

“Harry, we just want to talk with you, and I swear we’re not here on anyone’s orders or request.”

“Not good enough Hermione, I’m sorry, I have an appointment in ten minutes.....as I’m sure Remus told you.” Ron took a step forward, undeterred by Harry’s wand pointed at him.

“I swear Harry, we’re not here to set you up in any way, and Remus wouldn’t have it even if we were. We just want to understand what you’re doing, and why. I promise Harry, whatever you tell us, we won’t try to stop you.”

“The problem Ron, is that whatever I tell you, Dumbledore will sift it out of your heads in less than 30 seconds! I want nothing more than to trust you three, really I do.....but I don’t dare. Once everything is done the way I need it to be, I’ll spill it all, but until then, it’s better for me if you’re left in the dark.....oh boy.....twins, did you check them for tracking charms?”

Fred and George swore to themselves and started waving their wands over the three teenagers. Harry did the same and they found multiple tracking and surveillance charms on all three of them.

“Bugger, he could be here any second. Fred, fire the floo!” Fred was standing nearest and threw some powder in it, just as Dumbledore and Moody came through the front door of the shop (which was technically open for business, even though there were no customers).

“Harry, we need to talk.” The boy himself responded by sprinting toward the floo at full speed, even as Dumbledore and Moody both shouted out:

Accio Harry Potter!

They fired directly at him, but the twins stood in the way of the spells and they disappeared. Harry made it to the fireplace, hopped in, and yelled out

“Gringotts Bank!” And then he was gone. The three kids hadn’t even gotten the chance to wish him a Happy Birthday. The two men looked darkly at the twins.

“Why did you do that? I know you must have some sympathy for Harry, but that was very foolish what you did.”

“Leave our store Dumbledore, now.....and you had better pray that we don’t report you two to the Ministry for kidnapping.”

“We had no intention of removing him from the premises.”

“Sure, and Fudge is about to be crowned the King of England.” Dumbledore couldn’t believe this, getting flack from these two of all people.

“You two should consider yourselves suspended from The Order, your loyalty is now in question.”

“If we say that’s fine with us, will that get you out of our store any faster?” The two older men left in disgust, and the twins rounded on the others.

“You three had better have good explanations for those charms, or you will be very sorry.” Ginny had finally had enough:

“Who the hell do you people think you are, how many times are we going to have our loyalty questioned? All we are doing is trying to find out what’s going on here, but you and Harry are treating us like traitors!” Fred walked up to her, not intimidated in the least.

“Keep shouting at us Ginny, and you’ll find out what George and I are capable of. Now in case it has escaped your attention little sister, Harry and Dumbledore are having a series of disagreements, and we are fully and completely on Harry’s side in this, and all other matters.”

“He’s right you three, and so was Harry, anything you get told is the same as telling Dumbledore as long as you’re staying at Headquarters. Harry cares about you three very much, but that cannot be a factor right now. Sorry, but for this match, you’re not in the starting lineup. Now Ginny, it’s your day to work here, Lee has a list of things for you to do in the back. Lovebirds.....do whatever you need to do to keep out of our hair for the rest of the day.” Ron and Hermione left, going to parts unknown. Ginny, rather sullenly, went back to help Lee. The twins just hoped there wouldn’t be a battle at the bank or the trial.

Fortrap’s Office, Gringotts Bank

9 am

A somewhat shaken Harry entered his manager’s office, the last to arrive of the beneficiaries.

“Ah Mr. Potter, right on time.....what happened? You look rather tense.”

“Oh nothing sir, Dumbledore and Moody just tried to abduct me, that’s all. You must be Fortrap, pleased to meet you sir.”

“The pleasure is mine Mr. Potter, and I’m relieved to note that your erstwhile Headmaster has failed to take you.....again.” Remus and Tonks, for their parts, didn’t look especially surprised at the news, but neither looked happy. Tonks spoke first:

“I’m sorry for that Harry, Dumbledore was with me when the owl arrived from Fortrap here, I left the note laying on the table, he must have read it. I did not give you up.”

“Nor did I Harry, though I knew the kids were going to try to talk with you, they asked me to help set up a meeting and I thought that you would likely come into Diagon Alley through the twins’ shop. He must have found out somehow and planted some tracking charms on them. Happy Birthday by the way.” He reached out his hand to Harry’s shoulder, only to be confronted with Harry’s quick draw as the lad flinched away.

“So that’s how you took Snape eh? Travis has been doing some bragging on you at Auror Command, that was pretty fast.”

“I don’t have any hidden portkeys on me Harry, I’m here for Sirius, no more, no less.” He proceeded to give his wand to Fortrap, and Tonks took the hint and did likewise. Harry refused to mimic the gesture however, but did put his wand back in his pocket.

“Sorry Tonks, Remus, it’s just so much easier not to trust anyone at the moment. I promise you that I will not fire first either way.” That had to be good enough for the two adults, and they both looked to the goblin, who appeared to have a bemused expression on his face.

“I’m glad that is settled, as much as it can be anyway. Now onto the will: I need Harry Potter, Remus Lupin, and Nymphadora Tonks to swear a written wizard’s oath that you are who you say you are.”

The three did this, presumably to counter anyone who might be using Polyjuice Potion. Nothing untoward happened, so Fortrap brought out one sheet of parchment and began reading:

This is the Last Will and Testament of Sirius Black, heir of the House of Black. I testify on this date of May 31st, 1996 that I am of sound mental and physical health and I am under no undue influence at all as I make these bequests.

Remus, Tonks, Harry.....I know you would rather have me back alive than get what I’m giving you here, but the sad fact remains that I’m gone. I hope I had a good death, and didn’t get run over by some idiot muggle car or something inane like that, but these events can’t be chosen, they choose us. Please don’t mourn me too much, but smile when you think of something funny I did or said, and know that I’m in a better place. I love you all, and remember that you being in my life made it so much better.

To Nymphadora Tonks (oh I love writing your first name Tonks, stop squirming) I leave the sum of one million galleons. Have fun with it

girl, quit working for that idiot Fudge if you have a mind to, the world is your oyster.

To Remus Lupin I leave the sum of one million galleons and the deed to Number 12 Grimmauld Place. Let Dumbledore keep using it for the Order if you like Remus, or kick him out, I don't care. Unfortunately Kreacher comes with the house, make sure his end is fitting ok?

To Harry Potter I leave the rest of my money, which as of today is 1.23 million galleons, and the deed to a small island in the south Caribbean Sea. Remember that tropical bird that delivered those letters to you Harry? That's where it came from, I had a good time hiding there, I should have thought of it years earlier. I also bequeath to you every single book in the library of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, you need them more than Remus does, Merlin knows.

One condition though: In order for Remus and Nymphadora access their gifts, they must swear both a written and a verbal wizard's oath to support Harry Potter against anyone he considers to be his enemy, which is including, but not limited to: the idiot who calls himself Lord Voldemort, and Albus Dumbledore, if Harry should find himself at odds with him. If either of them should refuse to honor this condition, their share of the money shall revert to Harry.

Please look out for and care for each other, you are my family and I miss you as much as I hope you miss me. Good luck.

Sirius Black

Harry's face was expressionless as he tried as hard as he could to hold it inside him. He was more than grateful that the will had not been a recording of some sort from Sirius, he knew he would have broken down at that. Remus didn't bother holding it in as tears streamed down his face, but he remained quiet as he gripped the arms of his chair. Tonks was smiling, she was taking Sirius' message to heart and remembering him very fondly. The fact that she was rich hadn't penetrated yet.

“Mr. Lupin, Ms. Tonks, I believe you have an oath to swear to. Mr. Black made it clear in his testimony what he wanted, and you need to decide.”

“I, Remus Lupin, do swear a wizard’s oath to support Harry Potter against anyone he considers to be his enemy, and I mean anyone.”

“I, Nymphadora Tonks, swear my wizard’s oath to support Harry Potter against all those he considers to be his enemy.”

“Good, now if you two will sign these documents, you become eligible for your gifts.” Both of them signed the parchments where indicated.

“Excellent, your gifts will be transferred to your vaults by lunchtime today.”

“Harry, have we sufficiently proven ourselves just now? There’s no way we can break our oaths.”

“I’ll tell you what I told Ron, Ginny, and Hermione: Whatever I tell you, you can’t protect that information from Dumbledore if he really wants it.”

“Are you leaving Hogwarts?”

“I’ll tell you that much, yes I am. The plans are in place and there’s nothing anyone can do to change my mind. I will not set foot in that castle as long as the current leadership is in place.”

“Where are you going? To another magic school? To live as a muggle?”

“Sorry Tonks, that would give away too much. I’m going somewhere where no one attempted to murder a student last year, know that much.”

“I guess we’ll have to be satisfied with that. Once you get where you’re going, please try to find a way to keep in touch Harry.”

"I will Remus, now if you folks will excuse me, I have a Potions teacher to put in prison for a few years."

"We know, we're going too. Go ahead and floo over to the Ministry first, we'll come in a few minutes." Harry nodded, and turned to Forttrap.

"Thank you sir, I appreciate your help."

"You're welcome Mr. Potter, good luck at the trial this morning." Harry shook his hand (and still refused to come into physical contact with Remus or Tonks) and left the office. Tonks and Remus followed him a few moments later. By the time they got to the courtroom it was almost full, half an hour before the trial.

Courtroom A, Ministry of Magic

10 am

Fudge strode into the courtroom with as much dignity as his short and pudgy frame would allow him. The Harry/Snape mess had reflected pretty well on him, because of his decision to emancipate Harry, and a tiny bit of his swagger was back. He looked over the crowded room and saw that the Wizengamot was fully assembled. He spied Peter Tyson in the audience, as well as Bill Weasley.....though the two were not sitting together, Bill was sitting with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, along with his parents. Fudge assumed his place on the dais, and Percy quickly joined him.

"Let's get this started shall we? Bring in the defendant!"

Two Aurors led Snape into the courtroom, and he was placed in the chair. Chains did not wrap around Snape, this not being a capital crime.

"This is the case of the People versus Severus Snape. The defendant is charged with unlawful entry and assault on a minor thought to be unable use magic. I am Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic presiding. Amelia Bones will represent the Department of Magical Law

Enforcement. The defendant has chosen to represent himself. Severus Snape, how do you plead to these charges?"

Snape rose, and with a significant look at Dumbledore, spoke:

"I plead not guilty to both charges."

"Very well, Madam Bones, please call your first witness."

"The DMLE calls Harry Potter to the stand." Harry walked to the witness chair and took his place there.

"Please state your name and occupation for the record."

"Harry Potter, I'm a student." Snape shared another look at Dumbledore and rose from his chair.

"At this point I would request that Mr. Potter here be administered Veritaserum, as my history with Mr. Potter is well known as a bad one, and everyone here knows it, thanks to the Daily Prophet."

"Mr. Potter, do you have any objections?"

"Yes I do, I do not see this as being warranted under the circumstances. This is not a capital case, and I do not want the defendant to be allowed to ask questions about my private dealings. This is nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to find out them through supposed legal means."

"What, may I ask....." Snape was interrupted by Fudge.

"No, the defendant may not ask. I agree with Mr. Potter, it would be one thing if the defendant was charged with murder, but he is not. The court rules for Mr. Potter. Madam Bones, please continue."

"Mr. Potter, rather than go through a tedious question and answer phase, I would like to use your pensieve memory of the incident to show the court what happened. Am I right in understanding that you were there for the entire episode?"

"No ma'am, I did not see the defendant enter the house. I heard him enter yes, but my pensieve memory will not include footage of him walking through my aunt and uncle's front door."

"Fair enough, please prepare your memory." Harry did, and used his wand to put the memory in the silver bowl provided. Bones pointed her wand at the bowl, and the memory began projecting so that the entire room could see.

The 'movie' started off with Harry sitting on his bed, he then heard Snape start yelling for him from the living room. It then played out as we have already seen. The three kids watched in horror as Snape tried to subdue Harry, and then Ron let out a loud cheer when Harry put Snape into the wall (earning a light smack on the back of his head from Molly). The whole place started cackling when Harry put Snape's wand up his nose, and Snape went rigid in his seat (he had wondered how it had gotten there) and if possible, went even more pale at all of the laughter. Dumbledore just sat there mentally cursing the ineptness of his subordinates, trying to keep Snape out of Azkaban was going to be much harder than he had imagined it would be.

The memory ended, and everyone took a deep breath. Bones approached Harry again.

"A few questions Mr. Potter. Did you send your house elf to the DMLE before the defendant arrived?"

"Yes and no Madam Bones. Dobby.....that's my house elf.....did not leave Privet Drive until after Snape came inside, but before he started firing spells. I know I would have a lot of egg on my face if the Aurors came and no assault had taken place.....but I was willing to risk that to ensure my safety."

"Who took the pictures that were so prominently featured in the Daily Prophet on Saturday?"

"My other house elf Winky, she was stationed outside, just in case."

"So in effect, you set up the defendant?"

"No ma'am, I prefer to think of it as allowing for what might happen. If Snape had not assaulted me, then Winky's photographs would have been quite boring. If Snape had not assaulted me, I would likely be sitting here as a defendant on the charge of filing a false complaint. However, he did assault me, and I was proven correct on all counts."

"Thank you Mr. Potter, I have no further questions." Snape rose and stared hard at Harry for a few moments. He tensed up, and after briefly glowering at Harry, said:

"I have no questions for Mr. Potter at this time." Gasps could be heard all around the courtroom. Snape and Dumbledore had agreed beforehand that if Veritaserum wouldn't be allowed (and Dumbledore had pressed Fudge hard in private the day before), then Harry should not be antagonized any further. Snape had actually apologized to Dumbledore for what had happened.....though more for being caught than anything he actually did. Bones wasn't surprised at all, as Fudge had filled her in on Dumbledore's Veritaserum pleas, and called her next witness.

"The DMLE calls Senior Auror Travis Biller." Biller rose from his place in the courtroom and sat in the witness chair.

"Please state your name and occupation for the record."

"Travis Biller, Auror."

"You were the investigating Auror in this case were you not?"

"I was, I was the Senior Auror on duty the night of the incident, and responded to the call."

"How did that come about?"

"Harry Potter's house elf came to get me with a note from aunt. It said that the defendant was in the house threatening Mr. Potter with his wand. It informed us that she and her husband were muggles and could not defend Mr. Potter adequately."

"The DMLE has this note and will now enter it into evidence." It was so done. "Please continue Mr. Biller."

"Within one minute my team, which included myself, Robert Graham, and Sarah Westbrook, portkeyed over there. We found Mr. Potter in control of the scene and the defendant bound with magical ropes. We questioned Mr. Potter and the defendant and came to the conclusion that Snape had fired first and Mr. Potter responded in kind, winning the duel, if one wants to call it that."

"Did the defendant admit to the assault and the unlawful entry?"

"He admitted to the assault, and did not deny the unlawful entry, and I asked him to give a statement at the scene. I did a Priori Incantatem of Snape's wand, and it confirmed Mr. Potter's accounting of the spells fired at him before he responded."

"Thank you Mr. Biller. One final question, as part of your duties for this case, I would like you to show us, via pensieve, your interview with Petunia and Vernon Dursley."

"Yes ma'am. This morning I interviewed the aunt and uncle of Mr. Potter to confirm the unlawful entry. They willingly accepted Veritaserum and I had a brief session with them." A pensieve was put in front of him, and Travis put his wand to his head and withdrew the memory

It showed the two muggles, being rather polite for them, detailing their parts in last Friday's drama. They gave away nothing that would harm Harry, in no small part because Charlie had gotten rid of a few incriminating details. The memory lasted fifteen minutes, and concluded Bones' questioning of her subordinate.

"Mr. Snape, do you have any questions for the witness?"

"I do. Mr. Biller, did I note state to you that I was ordered to enter the Dursley house by Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"Yes you did." Bones knew that one was coming, and was ready:

“Objection, Albus Dumbledore, however much authority he has in our world, has absolutely none in the muggle world. He was not aware of Mr. Potter’s emancipation at the time, so as far as he was concerned, it was a muggle house with an underage wizard living there. Add that to the note that you heard the defendant acknowledge in front of Mr. Potter, and this line of defense had no legal basis.”

“The objection is sustained, but your point is made Mr. Snape.”

“I have no further questions.”

“The DMLE has no other witnesses. We acknowledge the bad history between Mr. Potter and Mr. Snape, and between Mr. Potter’s father and Mr. Snape, but we agree that it has no basis here in this trial. We ask the court to consider only this incident.”

“Thank you Madam Bones. Mr. Snape, do you have any witnesses or a statement to make?”

“I have no witnesses and a very brief statement. I was operating under orders from Headmaster Dumbledore when I entered the Dursley house, I was also acting under the assumption that Mr. Potter was a minor child with Dumbledore as his wizard guardian. It turns out I was in error, and I apologize for that. The lessons I was there to impart to Mr. Potter were very important, and when he refused them, I admit that I became angry, and I decided that he was going to sit for his lessons come hell or high water. I admit that what I should have done is go back to Hogwarts and retrieve the Headmaster, in an effort to solve the situation diplomatically.” Fudge looked him over, Snape had never sounded so humble in the years that Fudge had known him.

“Are you changing your plea at this time?”

“Yes I am, I plead guilty to both counts and I throw myself on the mercy of the Wizengamot.” This was not a snap judgment on his part. He and Dumbledore had also agreed that if Harry’s memory played like they thought it might, then this was the best play.

“Very well Mr. Snape. The Wizengamot will now retire to their chambers to render its decision.” The members left, and the courtroom started buzzing. Harry was sitting by himself in the front row, and he turned to his erstwhile friends and gave them a smile. He made no effort to talk with them however, and pulled out a book from his pocket (shrunk) and started reading.

The Wizengamot was gone for one hour, and they returned with mostly blank expressions on their faces. Dumbledore nodded to Fudge that everything had been decided, and the Minister called for everyone’s attention.

“Professor Dumbledore, has the Wizengamot reached a verdict?”

“We have, Minister Fudge. Given Professor Snape’s admission of guilt on both charges, we do find him guilty. We have taken into account his long record of service at Hogwarts, and his service in the last war, and have decided that it would not be in the best interests of the magical community to incarcerate him in Azkaban.” He turned to Snape and looked at him with a hint of sadness.

“Severus Snape, you are to be sentenced to three years of house arrest, sentence to be served at your home in Snape Manor, Oxfordshire. You will be allowed no floo access and the house will be barred against all visitors who do not have pre-approval from the Ministry of Magic. Multiple tracking charms will be placed on you to ensure that you do not leave. If you are found to have left your home or interfered with the charms placed upon you in any way, you will be re-sentenced by this body to a term in Azkaban of no less than 20 years. Your employment at Hogwarts is of course terminated, but you may have full access to potions equipment and ingredients necessary to do private work in your field. Mr. Snape, do you understand this sentence as I have described it to you?”

“I do.”

“Then it will be carried out immediately. In my capacity as Hogwarts Headmaster, I will personally make sure that the contents of your school office are delivered to you post haste.”

“Thank you Headmaster.”

“This court is now adjourned.” The room was abuzz again and Harry took advantage of it to slip out the door as quietly as he could. He flooed to The Leaky Cauldron and took a taxi from there to the House of Commons, where he got lost for awhile before returning to his hotel.

The next night, he would have a going away party with all of his people, a kind of belated birthday party of sorts as well. He passed thanks around like candy, and he promised multiple times to keep in touch, saying that he would buy another owl once in America if he had to. He knew deep in his heart that he cared about all of them very much, and for others as well.....but he never had second thoughts about his decision.

Thursday, August 2, 1996

Peter picked Harry up three hours before his flight left, but instead of going to the airport, they took a portkey to Peter's office (which Harry had not yet seen).

“Harry, I have an idea of how you can have some access to Britain on short notice, rather than rely on long-distance owls or sketchy international floo connections.”

“What does it involve?”

“Just an outlay of some galleons, that's all.....and a quick trip to Knockturn Alley.”

“Eh?”

“Did the twins ever tell you about a store in Knockturn Alley called Trunkenstein?”

“Yeah, they mentioned something about it the other night, why?”

“You remember Moody's seven compartment trunk? The one with all those doors?”

"I do, that's where we found the fake one hiding the real one."

"Well it was made by a guy named Anthony Hook, and he has perfected a better one since then, It amounts to a normal three level trunk, with an additional four levels acting as an apartment. Now the juicy part is, it comes with a private floo that can be utilized between similar trunks, as long as the proper code word is used.....and distance between trunks is not a limiting factor."

"So we would need two of them I take it."

"Yes we would. I talked with Anthony Hook this morning, and he'll sell us two of them for 4,000 galleons. This means you can cross the Atlantic with one blast of floo powder."

"Why would I want to?"

"Just in case Harry, it's always best to have options. We can station the other trunk in the twins' shop, or even with Neville at Hogwarts."

"I won't set foot in Hogwarts, I don't dare.....ok, let's get the trunks. But bring him here instead, we've come too far for me to risk walking about in public." Peter nodded, and walked over to the floo.

The purchase was completed in thirty minutes, Fred arrived to take possession of the British based trunk, Anthony Hook walked all of them through the security procedures, and Dobby retrieved the promised galleons from Gringotts. Harry took his already shrunk normal trunk out of his pocket and placed it in the new one. He and Peter took yet another portkey back to the hotel, where Jennifer Tyson (whose name was on the register for the room) was in the process of checking him out. The three of them took a taxi to Heathrow Airport, where Harry made his check-in with time to spare. They sat in the waiting area, idly chatting until they called Harry's flight.

"Remember one thing Harry, keep your wand out of sight on the airplane. I don't care if someone attacks you or tries to drag you off with a portkey, the secret of our world is more important than a temporary loss of freedom for you."

"I understand Peter, I won't do anything rash."

"I know you won't Harry. Now when you go through customs in the US, just tell them that it's a good luck charm that you carry with you."

"I will Peter, thank you for everything. I'm glad we could keep it our little secret."

"So am I, it was like a muggle spy novel at times wasn't it? You look after yourself now, don't become too American on us."

"I won't Peter. It was lovely to meet you Jennifer, you take good care of this guy."

"I will Harry, be careful." They all hugged goodbye, and Harry, with only a backpack over his shoulder (loaded only with non-magical items, except for his wand), walked on to the plane, for the journey that would alter him forever.

Author's Notes: Harry's flight is ripped right from a travel website, and is scheduled for the same day, time, and destination (the real one just takes place 10 years later), so the info there is totally realistic. On another matter, this is not a crossover story, but I am using a short-lived TV series and popular role-playing game's definitions for one of the groups here, but only very loosely (you'll see what I mean pretty early on). Milwaukee is featured in this chapter a little bit, and aside from a few streets, where our characters go is totally fictional (I've never been there). A big part of this chapter is a long conversation between Harry and another student, as Harry gets to know things in his new school. It gives a little insight into 'my' Harry as well, showing his perspective on some things.....so be warned that there isn't much action in this chapter, it's going to be much more relaxed and thoughtful. That's the goal anyway, I hope you like it.

Thursday, August 1, 1996 (cont.)

10:50 am (London time)

American Airlines Flight 87

Harry sat back in first class seat and contemplated what was about to happen. For someone who had flown hundreds of times on a thin stick at over 200 KM per hour with no parachute, this whole airplane business was starting to make him nervous. He calmed himself though, by doing some Occlumency exercises, which to your random muggle looks more or less like meditation. He made a mental note to just drink Sprite on this flight though, he didn't need the added jumpiness of caffeine. He pulled out one of his paperbacks, Noble House by James Clavell, a nice, fat book that would help him while away the 13 hour plane flight (including his layover)

The doors closed, the engines came on, and Harry noted with some relief that he was going to have the row to himself for the next 10 hours (he had to change planes in Chicago). He tensed up as they took off, but started to relax once they were in the air. He looked around the first class cabin (Peter assured him that the extra expense was worth it for the comfort, particularly on such a long flight) and saw no other teenagers that he might strike up a conversation with. He went back to his book, barely looking up, except for when the

flight attendant came by with the drink cart, and seven hours into the flight, dinner.

He was over halfway done with his novel when the Captain came on the intercom with the information that their descent into Chicago's O'Hare Airport was about to begin. Harry tensed up again, but everything went fine as they landed and taxied up to the gate. He was a little wobbly as he walked out the plane door, but soon found his land legs. He easily got through customs (no mention was made of the wand in his backpack, and his multi-compartment trunk did not set off any alarms either), his tourist visa was cleared with no comment other than 'welcome to The United States'. He then wandered over to the food court for some pizza, after a trip to the foreign exchange counter to trade his pounds in for dollars. After a two hour layover, he took his seat on his new plane. He was a little more used to the process by now, and the flight took less than half an hour to get him to Milwaukee.

After he de-planed, Harry looked around for his contact, and saw a woman approaching him with a smile on her face. She was about 5'7", very slim, with darkish blonde hair. Harry took out the photo he had had Peter obtain for him through the Daily Prophet, it matched. He relaxed considerably, and walked toward her.

"Hello Harry, I'm Joanne Murray." She reached out her hand and they shook hands. They were right in the middle of the airport and Harry wasn't worried about portkeys in front of all of these people.

"A pleasure to meet you ma'am."

"Mr. Tyson had nice things to say about you Harry, particularly about the chicken salad sandwiches that you had with him during your first meeting." He grinned at hearing that.

"Something tells me an imposter wouldn't have known about that little detail."

"He told me to mention it, as proof that I'm not an older man sipping Polyjuice, or a metamorph who reports to him."

“On Tuesday the metamorph in question swore an oath to support me against that certain older man. It was either that or give up a million galleon inheritance.” Murray had a nice laugh.

“I’m sure she didn’t take long to think about it. C’mon, let’s collect your trunk and we can be on our way.” They walked toward the baggage area to get the trunk.

“So how was your first plane ride?”

“It was fine except for the take-offs and the landings. I think you can find my fingerprints in the armrests.”

“That’s always the hardest part, I know I didn’t much care for them, even as a child.”

“So you’re muggleborn I take it?”

“Of a sort, my mother’s brother was a muggleborn wizard. One night when he and my parents had too much wine, I found out there was a magical world out there that no one knew about. I got my letter two years later, but I had badgered him into telling me all about it beforehand.”

“Are there a lot of muggleborns at Great Lakes?”

“They comprise just shy of a majority there, about 45 percent. The rest is split up between mixed bloods and purebloods. Our school is a little bit larger than Hogwarts, last year we had 332 students. We don’t know about this year yet, there will likely be some muggleborns who don’t answer their letters.”

“Is there a lot of rivalry between the muggleborns and the purebloods?”

“No there isn’t really, outside of a few on each side. We are much more closely tied to the muggle world than you are in Britain. The purebloods over here are more concerned with profiting from the muggles than in shunning them.” They reached the baggage area,

and quickly got hold of Harry's new trunk. They started toward the main front doors of the airport.

"How are we getting to school?"

"I have one of the school cars, it has portkey capability. We'll head toward a parking garage, and once we get to a dark enough corner of it, we'll take the easy way there." The car was parked pretty close to the doors, and they put the trunk in the back.

"Ma'am, before we leave.....me being here isn't going to cause you any problems is it? I mean I know you said yes to me coming, but I don't want to be a burden."

"You won't be Harry, trust me. It would be one thing if you were a runaway with any parents or the like chasing after you, but you're a legal adult who chose to do this out of many other options. I've never met your Minister Fudge personally, but since he did sign off on your early adulthood, there's nothing Dumbledore can legally do."

"I'm sure he can do a lot of things illegally."

"He will end up very unhappy if he tries, don't worry." She started the car and they moved off. Harry brought up a subject that he knew she must have thought about.

"What about Voldemort? What if he comes here?"

"I doubt he will come all the way over here to try and harm you, to invade a school whose defenses he knows nothing about. No, I think he'll be satisfied that you're not over there to bother him. It was not a factor in whether I took you in or not."

The subject was quickly changed, and Murray asked about a few of the teachers she had worked with during her year at Hogwarts. She and Jeffrey Hill, the longtime Professor of Muggle Studies, were still in occasional communication.....and so she knew more about Harry than most Americans would, even though Harry had never spoken to Hill.

After about 25 minutes, they got to a parking garage across from the sports arena in downtown. They got to the top level and Murray pressed a button the dashboard:

WHOOSH!

It lasted about 15 seconds, and was the closest Harry had ever come to riding on a rollercoaster.

"That was wild, can we do it again?" Another laugh, Murray seemed to have a good sense of humor. Harry has seen her laugh more in the last 30 minutes than he'd seen McGonagall laugh in five years. She noticed his look and asked him what was going on, so he told her.

"Yes, I noticed Minerva has a certain reserve." They appeared to be underground, but he could see a ramp that seemed to lead to the outside. Murray headed toward a flight of stairs on the east side, they passed four other cars on the way over there.

"My office is on the third floor, we can continue our talk there. We've missed dinner, so I'll send for some and we can eat there. How're you feeling? Are you tired? I know it's after 1 am in Britain right now, you've had a long day." Harry was a little tired, but it honestly hadn't occurred to him that it had been that long a day. He was still wired some from the excitement of the move, and the relief that he had made good his escape from Dumbledore. He still made a point of levitating his trunk though, rather than dragging it.

"I'm fine ma'am, I can last another few hours. The travel book I read yesterday recommended trying to push through to eliminate the jet lag."

"Easier said than done, or so I've found, but you're young.....boundless energy." It was Harry's turn to laugh.

"Like you said, easier said than done ma'am." They hiked up the flights of stairs and were soon walking down the corridor of what looked to be a wing of offices. Murray stopped in front of one and waved her hand in front of it, which opened the door. They walked in

and Harry found himself in a room that was equal parts muggle and wizard. It had multiple bookcases along the walls, as well as what looked like every Dark Detector that Harry had ever seen, and a few that he hadn't. She motioned him to take a seat, all the chairs in the room seemed to be designed for maximum comfort. Harry sunk in his seat and immediately regretted his previous statement that he could stay awake another few hours.

"Raffles!" An elderly house elf popped in, he was wearing what looked to be a miniature tuxedo.

"Yes ma'am?"

"Raffles, this is Harry Potter, a new student. Harry, Raffles is the major-domo of our house elf staff."

"Pleased to meet you Raffles."

"Likewise sir."

"Raffles ask Professor Heyman to join us, and have dinner for three sent up."

"Yes ma'am." He made a half bow, and left.

"Oh yeah, I don't know if Peter told you, but I have two house-elves working for me on a paid basis. What would their status be here? Would I be allowed to have them here?" This was the first look of surprise he had seen on Murray's face.

"All of our staff elves are here on a paid basis, so I'm relieved to hear that you pay yours as well. That's not common practice in Britain from what I remember. You'll be allowed to keep them in your employ here, but I have to wonder what you would need two of them for?"

"Well Dobby, the male.....well I've known him awhile, I'm the one who tricked his master into freeing him." He told her bits and pieces of the Chamber of Secrets story.

"I took him on to protect me until I could do spell work legally. Winky kind of came as part of the deal, they're very attached to each other." A sly smile hit Murray's face as there came a knock on the door.

"Come in David!" A tall, dark haired man in his mid 40's came into the room.

"This must be Harry, welcome to Great Lakes." Harry stood and shook the proffered hand.

"Thank you sir."

"Professor Heyman is the Deputy Headmaster, and does most of our dealings with the government and the other three schools."

"So you don't teach a subject?"

"Not anymore, once I got the promotion last year. I was one of the Charms instructors, but this job keeps me hopping enough that I don't have time to miss it." The food arrived a few seconds later, three plates filled with spaghetti and garlic bread, with three bottles of water as well. They idly chit-chatted for a few minutes as they started eating, and Heyman filled Murray in on what had happened during the time she was gone (not a whole lot really).

"Now Harry, let's talk about your classes for a bit, before we get to what is probably a long series of questions that you must have."

"Yes ma'am."

"I got a copy of your OWL scores and your yearly grades from Mr. Tyson, and they're very good."

"There's a lot of room for improvement though, I know that. A year without any violent drama should do wonders for me."

"One would hope, yes. It will relieve you to know that one of our similarities with Hogwarts is the OWL system, which is pretty much standardized in Europe and North America. Your OWL scores would have put you sixth in your class if you had taken them here, and you

still would have been first in Defense, but second in Charms.” Heyman took over the explanation from there.

“We have two kinds of classes for junior and senior year, regular and advanced. Advanced classes are open to those who get O’s in that subject on their OWL exams, the regular courses are open to everyone else. Everyone can take the NEWT test in whatever class they wish, but students in the advanced class will obviously be better prepared.”

“So I can take the advanced classes in Charms, Defense, and Care of Magical Creatures then.”

“Yes and no. The advanced class for Defense would more accurately be described as Basic Combat, and is required for anyone who wants Auror training. Advanced Charms is pretty much what it sounds like, you’ll learn some pretty funky stuff there, and its nice that you can take both Defense and Charms at that level. Creatures though, is not a class offered during the regular school year. We discontinued it in that form ten years ago due to a declining level of interest. We now offer it in the summer program, right now we have fifteen students taking it if I remember correctly, few of whom would probably have taken it during the regular school year.”

“Do a lot of students stay for the summer program?”

“Not that many stay, this summer we have fifty-three students staying here. Some are trying to get ahead in their studies, some trying to catch up and get extra tutoring.....and some are muggleborn students who are afraid, or not allowed, to go home.” Harry could certainly relate to that.

“If Hogwarts had this I would have stayed every summer.”

“We’ve been doing it now for twelve years, and it’s been a huge success. Creatures is the one stand-alone course that we offer in the summer, the rest of the summer program is tutoring. We have two teachers in every subject, and one stays around for the program. When I taught Defense I usually volunteered every year, it’s more relaxed.”

"Now as to your class requirements, you have to take a minimum of five, with a maximum of six. We also require you to participate in at least one school club or sports team. Right now we have 10 clubs going, plus teams for Quidditch and Quodpot. Your Quidditch skills are something that everyone here knows about you, so that will be an easy way for you to meet the requirement. Over the next few weeks you'll get a nice overview of the clubs here, and it will be easy to choose one to your liking, if that's the way you want to go."

"I'm sure I'll join something besides Quidditch, but you bring up something I'm somewhat afraid to ask.....just how well known am I here?" The two Americans looked at each other for a moment as if unsure how to handle this question. Heyman made the first attempt.

"Not as well known as you are over in Britain of course, but at least to American eyes you are the most famous living British wizard.....even more famous than Dumbledore or any your Quidditch heroes over there."

"I agree with David. You will be the cause of a lot of speculation once the students get a look at you.....and none know about you being here right now, at least until breakfast tomorrow. That said, I have no doubt that you will be able to fit in with little trouble. Famous as you are, I can tell from the time we've spent together that you're not some arrogant buffoon who revels in it, and Mr. Tyson told me how uncomfortable the whole thing makes you."

"It's a big reason I'm here right now, I don't want to be famous Harry Potter anymore, I want that noose off from around my neck."

"With that attitude, you won't have any problems here Harry, I assure you."

"That's a relief ma'am, sir, thank you. Now we were talking about classes. What are the differences between Hogwarts and Great Lakes? Are there any classes offered here that aren't there?"

"There are two classes offered at Hogwarts that aren't offered here, for your year anyway. We've already talked about Creatures, and the

other one is History of Magic. History is only offered for the first five years, we feel if you haven't gotten it in five years of classes, you never will. You can still take the NEWT test if you like, but there will have to be a lot of private study involved."

"That's too bad about no class for it, Peter turned me on to a few history books and I was starting to get a liking for it. I definitely would have taken it here."

"And it only took Mr. Tyson a few days to hook you on it, after five years with a ghost beat it out of you, amazing." Harry smiled some more, he certainly wasn't going to miss Binns.

"The main alternative class that we offer is a course on Wandless Magic (Harry's eyes bugged out). It's very select, and we take only the best OWL scores from the wand-using courses. Having seen your raw OWL scores: your Transfiguration high E, combined with your Defense and Charms scores, they make you eligible for the class if you wish to take it."

"You'd better believe I want to take it Professor Heyman, I would love to learn more about doing that kind of magic."

"Well that makes three classes for you then, including Charms and Defense. Any ideas on the others?"

"I'll stick with Transfiguration as well, I did some theory reading before I got my wand rights and I think I'll do better.....oh yeah, another question: I was emancipated in Britain last week, is that emancipation legal here too?" Murray answered that one:

"It is legal, I obtained a written opinion from our Ministry to that effect too. You should know that your Snape set-to.....I never liked that man by the way.....your incident with him made our newspaper here, front page coverage too. Like your paper there, it was sympathetic toward you. Just don't rub it in the nose of your classmates here and there'll be no problems. Okay, you have four classes picked, you need at least one more.....and none of this is binding Harry, you can have until next week to think about it if you want."

“That’s okay ma’am, I had to think about this for Hogwarts anyway. I think I’ll do Muggle Studies if I’m allowed to, though I didn’t take it at Hogwarts.”

“I would think not, given that you grew up with them, no need to study them at magic school. Muggle Studies here is a bit different. We lean heavily on their History and Politics, with some culture and business basics. We are much more closely aligned to muggles here, so we all have known a lot about them from birth, even the purebloods. There’s no ‘ooh, those muggles come up with the strangest things’”

“Quite a difference from home. My best mate is a pureblood and he didn’t know a thing about muggles until he got to Hogwarts. He’s not the prejudiced type either, he just never had the opportunity.” Heyman chuckled sadly.

“That’s our blessing and our curse over here Harry. We’re almost too close to them at times I think.....I’m a mixed blood by the way, my father was muggleborn and my mother is a pureblood.”

“I’m the same way, only my mother was the muggleborn.” Heyman nodded as if this was easy to believe, and continued.

“We’re too close to them in that some of us have lost our identity as wizards almost. There are 85,000 wizards and witches in The United States, and hundreds of them live their everyday lives as muggles, and just use their wands for certain conveniences around the house, and for easy travel. In a lot of ways it’s better in Europe, where you have the separation and the distinctiveness.”

“Why have you gotten so close to the muggles here then?”

“Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer Harry. We need to keep close tabs on the muggles in order to keep the secret of our existence.....and to make money off them, that is a factor. The other groups do the same thing.”

“What other groups?”

"The Kindred and the Lycans." Seeing Harry's confusion: "The vampires and the werewolves. They're much more organized over here than in Europe, and their clans and packs respectively are our rivals in a lot of ways. You see we don't have an American equivalent of your Voldemort, we just have two incredibly uneasy truces going with the Lycans and Kindred, truces that have lasted for over ten years now admittedly, but we all know they won't last much longer. The only advantage is that both of them hate each other more than they hate us."

"Well they don't really hate us Harry, there's just a lot of mistrust going on. Each of them fear, with some justification, that we'll side with the other.....or if worse comes to worse, we'll side with the muggles if open war ever breaks out. Of the three non-muggles races, we're the ones who can blend in the easiest, since we don't change at a full moon or need to drink blood to survive. Our governments in the past have played both ends against the middle quite successfully, but it has left scars. The muggles officially don't know about any of the three groups, but there are enough rumors and legends to make this chancy at times."

"So you don't have Dark Wizards?"

"Oh we do, they just work with everyone and not against us. Our Wizard Congress has quite a few Dark representatives, and they won't be saddened at all when our truces go by the boards, as they inevitably will someday. We have no choice but to stick together over here Harry, we haven't had a full out wizard war in this country in decades, since before David and I were born."

"One of my friends in Britain is a werewolf, he was bitten as a child and Dumbledore managed to keep the story hidden for a long time. Long enough for him to go to Hogwarts and befriend my mum and dad." This caused raised eyebrows.

"There aren't that many wizard/werewolves over here, and their loyalty is considered by both wizard and werewolf alike to be suspect at best. If he ever comes to visit you, warn us first, there are quite a few anti-Lycan wards around the school that will have to be gotten around."

"I will ma'am, though my friends visiting me here is not something I'm going to encourage. I would just as soon keep my past life separate from my present life for as long as I can get away with it."

"That sounds like a good idea. I have to tell you that I'm very encouraged by your attitude Harry, you seem to have thought this thing through and aren't here on a whim."

"I have thought it through ma'am, I had a few weeks at home with little else to do but think. I want you to know that I'm here to stay, however homesick I'll get or however much culture shock that I'll go through. Besides, as the saying goes, I've burned my ships." He was a bit surprised to see the large smiles on the faces of Murray and Heyman, but figured he would let them explain it if they wanted.

"We're very glad to hear that Harry, and we'll do all we can to help you through it of course. Now do you have any questions for us? Or would you like to wait until you've had a good night's sleep?" Harry stifled a yawn, it was now almost 2 am in Britain and he had gotten up before 7 am there. Add that to his no caffeine pledge (because of the jitters of the plane ride), and the thought of a warm bed was growing on him.

"Just one big one that I can think of: What about the House situation? Is it like Hogwarts at all?" Murray took this one, as she was the more Hogwarts familiar of the two Americans.

"Well like most things here Harry, it's Hogwarts-esque. You see, the first American wizard school was The Salem Witches Institute, it was founded very early on, well before The U.S. became independent. The other three schools are off-shoots of Salem. We came first, then The Tecumseh Magical Academy in Oklahoma, and finally The Pathfinder School in California. Salem itself was heavily modeled on Hogwarts, but like with most schools has evolved over the years, with certain American touches. So we're two iterations removed from Hogwarts, and we have a lot of the same structure without some similar details. Each of the four schools does things slightly differently, and we have a lot of leeway from the government's Education Department."

"Now as to your question: We have four Houses, just as your old school does, and the Houses have students from all seven years. The big difference is the sorting situation. Our Houses aren't noted for their distinctiveness from each other, and they have no personality trait that they represent, like Gryffindor and courage or Slytherin and cunning. We want students to interact on a daily basis with all kinds of personalities, rather than students who are most like themselves. When you're sorted Harry, and no we don't use a battered old hat to do it, the House you'll be placed in will be the one that will benefit the most by the qualities which are most prominent within you."

"So you want all the Houses to be equal?"

"More or less, yes. We want them to be diverse in the types of students that are in it, though actual academic performance will vary. I've always thought Hogwarts was insane for isolating the Slytherins like they do. All it does is push the students sitting on the fence into the Dark camp, because they feel like there's no where else to go."

"Is there a House Cup?"

"There is, though the points are determined somewhat differently. Points are based on class results, combined with Quidditch and Quodpot scores, as well as the standings in the Olympics." Seeing Harry's confused expression, Heyman explained.

"Oh yes, you wouldn't know about that. It's a series of competitions we have in the spring that measure magical power, quick thinking, and magical stamina. It's rather like that Tri-Wizard fiasco you had over there, except that nothing is remotely life-threatening. It's like muggle golf, where you compete against yourself and not the others. There are no duels or battling with magical creatures."

"The big difference in the overall points system is that points are not determined by the individual teachers, but by a series of standards that incorporate the areas I mentioned. In other words, there's no 'Excellent Mr. Smith, 10 points to Shawnee House'. Too much room for teacher bias that way. I never awarded points like that during my year at Hogwarts, and it caused a bit of a stir with our friend."

“One of the Houses is called Shawnee House?”

“Our Houses are named after famous early American wizards, one of them very early. You noticed that we smiled when you said that you’ve burned your ships. That was because one of our Houses is Cortez House, after the explorer. The others are Proctor House, named after Lizzie Proctor, and the only House name we share with Salem; Shawnee House, named after the Indian shaman The Shawnee Prophet; and Jefferson House, from the only wizard ever to be President of the United States. Our House Cup is called the Carver Cup, after George Washington Carver, the first famous African-American wizard. The House names are not indicative of the types of students within them though, like we’ve said. If you get sorted into Cortez House, it doesn’t mean you’re the conquering type, or the political type if you’re put into Jefferson House.” Murray let this sink in for a moment, and seemed to decide that Harry needed break for the remainder of the evening.

“Harry’s there is so much more we could tell you about the school and the American magical world, but there’s plenty of time for that. We have over four weeks left until the Fall term starts, and by then all of your questions should be answered. Tomorrow we’ll arrange a student guide for you, to show you around the school. It will be someone from your year and he or she will be able to fill you in on a lot of things, including some issues that we don’t know or would prefer not to tell you.” Harry and Professor Heyman both shared her smile. Heyman stood up.

“I’ll show you to the guest quarters Harry. Until you’re sorted you’ll stay there, they’re pretty comfortable. If you need anything tonight, just call for Raffles, and he will take care of you.”

“Your House-elves may join you there, we’ll figure out something for them to do later on.” Harry noticed Heyman’s quizzical expression (he hadn’t been there for the Dobby/Winky talk).

“Dobby! Winky!” The two of them popped in, and they noticed the two strangers, but it didn’t take much for them to figure it out.

“Yes Harry?”

“Guys, this is Headmistress Murray, and Deputy Headmaster Heyman. Sir, ma’am, this is Dobby and Winky.” The two Americans nodded pleasantly to Dobby and Winky, who Harry then noticed were wearing matching English National Team football jerseys. He started laughing, and was joined by the other two.

“Do I want to ask you two where you got those jerseys?” Dobby looked a little abashed, but smiled back when he said:

“No Harry, you probably do not.” Harry dissolved into a fit of laughter, as his tiredness temporarily went away.

“That’s what I get for asking the question I guess. Come on you two, Professor Heyman is going to show us where we’ll be living for the next month.” Dobby and Winky both nodded, Winky had not stopped looking around the office since she had popped in.

“Goodnight Harry, I’ll come collect you for breakfast tomorrow morning. I should be there around 8 am.”

“Yes ma’am.....thank you Professor Murray, thanks for taking me in.”

“You’re welcome Harry, have a good rest.” Harry stood up and started to grab his trunk, but Dobby shook his head and he and Winky snapped their fingers, levitating it for him. Heyman led the way out the door, and they made their way to the nearest stairwell. Nothing much was said during the brief journey, as the older man wanted to let Harry assimilate what he had just learned before hitting him with anything new. They went up two flights (to the fifth floor). Heyman waved his hand in front of one of the doors and it opened for him.

“That’s a nifty trick, with the door.”

“One of our security precautions. All our teachers open their offices that way, and Professor Murray and I can open every door in the school in that manner.” He waved his wand at the door.

“Place your hand flat on the door Harry, that will key you in to the be the only one to be able to open this particular door, except for Professor Murray and myself.” Harry did so, and the door glowed blue for about two seconds before becoming normal again. He turned to look at the room and saw what is basically a large-ish motel room, similar to the one he had stayed in at The Leaky Cauldron (his only motel experience).

“If someone knocks, just say ‘Come in’ and it will unlock automatically. Is there anything else you need?”

“No thank you Professor, I’ll be fine.”

“All right then, goodnight Harry, see you at breakfast.”

“Goodnight Professor Heyman.” Heyman nodded at Dobby and Winky, and took his leave. Harry removed his pj’s and his bathroom things from the top layer of his trunk. After that, he did a quick scan of the room to see if there were any surveillance charms (there weren’t). Dobby and Winky looked around and focused immediately on the clothes closet, where Dobby soon did his thing and made into a nice temporary room for the two of them, on a long-term basis they would live in the trunk.

“Professor Murray (he had a hard time calling anyone ‘Madam’, it just didn’t sound right) said we would figure out what you two can do around here tomorrow. But before that happens, I have a job for the two of you.” As he had expected, the two of them looked at him eagerly.

“First, get rid of those jerseys and wear something more normal, we don’t want you two sticking out around here. Wear them to bed if you feel the need, but we’re going to be enough of a conversation piece as it is. Second, I want you to start to make a map of the school. I haven’t seen the outside yet, and I doubt seriously that it’s a castle, but I want a blueprint of the place. Make a point of knowing all the entrances and exits to the building, and seek out any hidden passageways or tunnels that might be around.”

“Yes Harry, we will start right away.”

“Only do this floor tonight, we don’t want the other house elves to catch you and wonder who the heck you are. Be as subtle as you can while doing it, this isn’t something that has to be done this week or anything. Have it done by the time school starts and I’ll be very happy, that’s a month from now.” The two elves were vigorously nodding their heads.

“When you’re done, give me the finished product and I’ll see if Remus can’t make us another Marauder’s Map.” He still hadn’t decided what to do with the Hogwarts Map yet, it was going to be given to one of his friends, but he couldn’t decide which. Oh well, nothing more to do now but wait. He looked at his watch and it read 9:04 pm.....late enough, considering the time change. He did his bathroom business, and after asking Winky to wake him up at 7:30 am, went to bed. This had been a first day of the rest of his life, in more ways than one.

Friday, August 1, 1996

Noon (London time, 6 am Michigan time)

Grimmauld Place

This was the first meeting of the Order in almost a week (they had a brief meeting right before Harry’s takedown of Snape). Dumbledore had wanted one earlier, right after Snape’s trial at the latest, but scheduling had gotten in the way. Tonks, Kingsley, and Hestia were all working nights lately, and Remus and Molly (for reasons easily surmised) had been unwilling to attend meetings at 3 am (they, along with Moody, were the primary Order members who were not employed. Even Hogwarts people had summer duties of some sort). Because of the prime subject of the meeting, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had been invited. Somewhat to the surprise of Dumbledore, Luna and Neville had declined invitations to do the same, citing family obligations.

“Let us begin. Kids, have you had any communications from Harry since the trial?” The three of them had agreed earlier that Hermione was to be their spokesperson, and that it would be fine to tell

Dumbledore what they that they didn't actually know any more than he did.

"No sir, we haven't. Our owls have returned without delivering any messages."

"So he is living in the muggle world then, and you have no idea where that could be?"

"No sir, and before you ask, he's not at my house. None of us have any idea where he is."

"I know he's not at your house Ms. Granger, don't worry. What we need to do is find him, or at the very least communicate with him." Remus had a pleased look on his face as he addressed that issue.

"And the fact that Harry doesn't seem to want that, makes no difference to you Albus?"

"I think at the very least we deserve an explanation from him. We will all be very sorry if the Death Eaters catch up to him before we do."

"They won't catch up to him Albus, none of them know the first thing about tracking someone in the muggle world, and they know much less about his tendencies than we do. He's probably safer now than he ever has been in the summer." The shot hit just where it was supposed to.

"He was protected at Privet Drive, more protected than he would have been anywhere else."

"Funny how he didn't seem to think so.....oh that's right, you never cared what he thought. That doesn't matter much anymore, but still." The rest of the room wasn't used to anyone taking on Dumbledore like this, and they all chalked it up to Remus' new found wealth, and his sense of freedom that emanated from it. A flash of irritation crossed the Headmaster's face, but the last sentence gave him pause.

"What do you mean by 'it doesn't much matter anymore'?"

Bill had told him of Harry's departure the day before, the eldest Weasley son had made a point of avoiding Dumbledore since the going away party on Wednesday night. Remus still knew few details, but decided that it wouldn't hurt to let loose a little information.

"Because it would take all the galleons in Great Britain to bring Harry back to Hogwarts. He's gone Albus, and it could have been prevented very easily if you had cared more about him." This was too much for Dumbledore, and he had rarely looked so angry in front of the Order, who all looked thunderstruck at the idea of Harry not coming back to school (only Remus and Tonks knew besides Bill).

"I have never cared about a student more than I have cared about Harry Potter!" Remus didn't flinch one bit, he had had enough here

"Yes, but you cared so much about saving his life you didn't stop to think about saving his soul! Has there ever been a sixteen year old wizard with the kind of psychological damage that Harry has accumulated? Save Tom Riddle perhaps, and we all know how that turned out!" Dumbledore was seconds away from drawing his wand, and was forestalled by Moody grabbing his wand arm and shaking his head. Dumbledore closed his eyes and calmed himself.

"Mistakes were made, yes. But we're past that now, and we have to deal with what Harry is planning to do. What makes you think he won't come back to Hogwarts?"

"He told me so, right after the will reading. He didn't say where, or even if he's already made arrangements or will wait.....but he's gone Albus. I doubt you'll lay eyes on him before the Malfoy trial in October, if even then." In all of his musing in the last week, it had never occurred to Dumbledore that Harry might not come back to Hogwarts.

"And you don't think that he was just trying to mislead you?"

"He had just inherited over a million galleons, he has the resources to make it happen. Besides which, did you think that getting his emancipation was the first step?" Everyone noted that Remus didn't

technically answer the question, but he raised some valid points. Molly decided to enter the debate.

“What did the Minister tell you Albus?”

“Very little, he was surprisingly firm about it actually. He said little other than that he and Harry had had a chat and have put most of their differences behind them. He claims he does not know if Harry is planning anything further.”

“What did Harry promise him in return for his emancipation?”

“I don’t know Molly, it could be that Harry promised the Minister a break with me as his part of the deal.” That sure sounded plausible to everyone, not that it helped explain where Harry might be. Molly then asked Dumbledore the question that they all were wondering:

“What are we going to do if he isn’t coming back?”

“He will come back Molly, he just needs some time to work things out apparently. I doubt he will leave the country, I think he’s just playing tourist for awhile in a mistaken effort to punish me. Perhaps it will be good for him, a taste of the muggle world might be just what he needs to appreciate being magical.” Even for Dumbledore this was reaching, and Bill needed all his self control not to laugh in the old man’s face. Peter had reported to him that Harry had gotten on the plane, and Bill had kept an eye on the muggle news to see if anything strange had happened on the flight (it hadn’t). However, he knew that Harry would spring his surprise on Dumbledore when he wanted to, and probably wanted to get used to his new surroundings before he did so. There was one point that he wanted to address here though:

“Okay, now that we’ve established that Harry will come back when he bloody well feels like it, I would like to talk about Fred and George, and why they aren’t here right now.”

“They interfered with our chance to talk with Harry, they knew I wanted an opportunity to clear the air with him.”

"Yet again you miss the point Albus, the twins tell me that Harry fled as fast as he could.....apparently he didn't want to clear the air."

"Fred and George have a duty to the Order, one that supersedes any friendship or partnership they have with Harry. I was not going to kidnap him, I just wanted to try to talk with him." He couldn't believe that he was being so misunderstood, and yes, he was not used to being questioned like this.

"So what Harry wants doesn't matter?"

"In the grand scheme of things, no it doesn't."

"You mean in the sense of 'The power he knows not'.....or in the sense of 'neither can live while the other survives'?" Dumbledore sucked in his breath as Bill quoted from the Prophecy. There was only way he could have found out.

"I can't believe Harry told you." The rest of the rest of the room looked rather confused, except for Remus and Hermione, who blurted out:

"That's what the Prophecy says!"

"Yes Hermione, that's part of what it says. Harry told me last week, he wanted to see if it sounded as stupid to me as it did to him. Dare we tell them who the so-called prophet was Albus?" Dumbledore held his head in his hands as he couldn't believe that Harry.....well yes he could believe it actually, the lad would want to confide in someone, but Bill? How did he even know Bill that well?

"Last Friday night Bill, where were you?" Bill smiled easily, and said what his parents and siblings had already suspected:

"I was in the Dursley kitchen with Charlie, Fred, and George, waiting to see if you would so stupid as to attack Harry.....I offer you due credit for not giving into temptation. The Aurors being there helped surely." These people didn't need to know about Neville, Luna and Peter now did they?

“You helped him plan Severus’ setup, a setup that we will be long be paying for!”

“Harry needed help Albus, and yes, I gave it to him very willingly. When you’re in trouble and you need to talk to somebody, if you can’t go to your friends, you next try your enemies.....that’s what I was trying to prevent. You think Harry couldn’t go to Voldemort and cut a deal right now? He would probably be made second in command if he jumped ship anytime soon. Think about it Albus, put away your twisted need to control an abused kid for one minute, and think about that.” This wasn’t why Bill really helped of course, but he knew it was plausible enough and sounded rational. Dumbledore rewarded this by sighing and nodding his head, bypassing the insult.

“You may be right Bill, you may be right. It’s clear that Harry has become very paranoid, and I suppose he might think that getting out of our world is better than his alternatives. I never should have let it get this far.” Remus saw the opening and jumped in with both feet.

“You never should have involved Snape in teaching him anything besides Potions. That’s what probably set this whole thing in motion, he was afraid of what that nut might do to him.....and he was proven right, wasn’t he? I’d wager a goodly portion of my new inheritance that if you had gone over there yourself to teach him, or gotten another Occlumency instructor, little or none of this would have happened.”

Dumbledore saw them all agreeing, even Moody seemed to think it made sense. He then made a decision, one that the rest of them had been begging him to make: He told them the story of the Prophecy.....and he told them that it was Trelawney, causing skeptical looks on many faces.

“There you have it, that’s what you adults were guarding for a year. That’s what you kids risked your lives for.” Bill interrupted him:

“And that’s what Harry does not believe in.” Eh?

“I’m sorry, what did you say Bill?”

“Harry doesn’t believe that the Prophecy is true. He thinks you could handle Voldemort but for some reason have pushed it on to him.” Dumbledore wanted to tear his beard out at hearing that.

“And what exactly does he base this disbelief on?”

“Trelawney, and the fact that he doesn’t want to die for a wizard public that alternates between calling him a saint and calling him a devil. Kids are funny that way.”

“And you wonder why I waited so long to tell him about it? This is precisely the kind of thing I was trying to avoid!”

“Then you should have kept him closer and let him calm down in plain sight, rather than in that house with those idiots.” Much as it killed the old man to admit it, Bill had a point there, and he shocked them all by saying so.

“Yes, I have to agree with you there Bill. I should have either kept him at Hogwarts this summer, or put him at The Burrow.” Bill didn’t believe a word of it, but refrained from saying so. Arthur chimed in for the first time:

“Since you seem to have a pulse on what Harry’s doing, what do you suggest we do Bill?”

“This isn’t the answer you want to hear, but I’ll tell you anyway: Nothing, do nothing and let him work his demons out in his own way. The twins and I have done what we can for him, but he needs this time to sort things out, and he’ll never get that done at Hogwarts.”

“At least tell us he’s going to another magical school, and not going back to the muggles.” Bill figured he could throw them this bone:

“Yes, I can tell you that he will start his sixth year at a magical school come September. He made the arrangements before he left the country.” Ron couldn’t believe this:

“He left the country! When was he planning on telling us this?”

“Hedwig might already be on her way here to do just that Ron. After Tuesday’s WWW fiasco, he thought he should make good his escape before telling you three anything.” Ron surprised them all by rounding on Dumbledore.

“Don’t you ever place a charm on me without my permission again! He would trust us if we weren’t around you all the time!” Ginny and Hermione weren’t as loud as Ron in their agreement, but just as resolute.

“I agree Headmaster, don’t ever use me like that again.”

“Same for me Professor Dumbledore, I don’t like the position you put us in. If Fred and George hadn’t stepped in front of your spells, I was prepared to.” Hermione is the one who said this, and Dumbledore knew then that he was defeated. If anyone in the room should appreciate his position (besides Moody, who had always advocated keeping Harry locked up tightly at Hogwarts and out of trouble), it was Hermione. However, she had that ‘don’t mess with me’ look on her face, one that Harry would have been proud to see.

“Okay, I surrender to the will of the group. I will await contact from Harry, rather than initiate it from my end.....you have my word.” This seemed to satisfy most of the Order, including Molly and Arthur.

“And you will have the twins reinstated to the Order, right?”

“Yes, as long as you answer this question Bill: Do you at least know which school Harry is going to be attending, so that he can be contacted if the need truly arises?” Bill had been working on his own Occlumency over the last two weeks, and he was confident he could prevent Dumbledore from rampaging through his mind if need be. The twins had no such aptitude for Occlumency, and with their permission, Bill had Obliviated the knowledge of exactly which school Harry was at. They only knew it was in North America. Charlie was out of the old man’s reach, and Dumbledore didn’t know about the other three.

“Yes I do know where Harry will be going to school this fall, and I will divulge it if I ever feel it necessary.”

“Good enough.....don’t look so skeptical Bill, you have done a good job of convincing me. I realize that Harry must make the next move, I cannot force him to help us. He needs to do it of his own free will. Now kids, if you will retire to the living room, we have a few more things to discuss here this afternoon.” Ron, Hermione, and Ginny left the room somewhat reluctantly, and the Order meeting continued on for another 20 minutes. Soon all of the adults streamed out of the kitchen, Dumbledore hitting the floo first. Ginny held on to Bill’s arm to stop him from leaving, and soon it was just the kids, Molly, Bill, and Remus left in the house.

“Where is he Bill?”

“You know bloody well that I’m not going to answer that Ginny. Harry told me that he would contact you when he was settled, and given that it’s been a day, I doubt he’s settled yet.”

“Is he safe Bill? Just tell us that.”

“Yes Mum, he’s safe. After all, he has Dobby and Winky looking after him.....yes he pays them Hermione. I wouldn’t be surprised if Dobby is the highest paid house elf in the world.” Hermione had to smile at that.

“So there’s really nothing we can do?”

“Just don’t get snotty with him when he does make contact with you, trust me when I tell you that won’t help things with him. Be upfront about why you two didn’t see fit to tell him about your relationship.....and no, your ‘you told us not to write you’ excuse didn’t come close to holding water with him, since you ignored it anyway. Now I have to get back to work, and we’re done talking about Harry for the near future, you lot need to live your own lives and not be obsessed about his.” With that, he hugged Molly and went to floo back to the bank.

Great Lakes Magical Institute, Guest Quarters

8 am (Michigan time)

Knock, knock

“Come in!” Murray entered the room to find Harry sitting on the bed, looking over a map of Michigan that he had purchased in the Chicago airport during his layover.

“Good morning Harry, sleep well?”

“10 hours straight ma’am, I feel pretty good.” Murray sat next to him on the bed and pointed a finger:

“This is where we are, halfway between Shingleton and Seney. On the outside we look like a large factory to other magical people, but there are muggle repelling charms all over the grounds. Even the few who drive by don’t see anything other than a muggle farm, so they don’t get curious. All four schools here in the U.S. are charmed to look like farms actually, it’s the easiest cover. The wards are pretty complicated, but they’ve never been breached by anyone with harmful intent.”

“So you get the stray motorist with a broken down car and that’s it?”

“There was one pregnancy a few years ago, the wife went into labor right in front of the athletic field, but we took care of it.” She stood back up, and Harry followed her out the door.

“The dining hall is on the first floor, the floor you’re staying on is the top floor.”

“So everything is in this building?”

“Pretty much, we use all five floors plus the basement. Floors four and five are the student floors, each House has half of a floor. Classes are on one and two, with the faculty offices and residences on three. We use the basement for club meetings and conferences. You’re in one of our two guest rooms, usually parents stay in them during the school year when visiting their kids. Professor Heyman told me that you didn’t run into any students last night, just a coincidence.”

“It’s a nice room, I’ll be more than fine there for the next month.”

“That’s good to hear, I’ve decided that your elves should stay in there with you for the rest of the month. Once the school year starts we can do one of two things: You can have them work for you in your dorm and keep paying them yourself; or you can loan them out to the school for your time here, we’ll pay them, and they will do things around the building for us.”

“I don’t know ma’am, I’m inclined to want to keep them in the dorm with me, since you say it’s okay.....but let me talk to them and find out what they would prefer.” Murray looked happy to hear that, and seconds later they came upon the dining hall.

The dining hall was another difference from Hogwarts, instead of four long tables for the students, it held a few dozen smaller tables. The tables held anywhere from four to ten places, and only about four of them were occupied at the moment. There appeared to be no staff table, but Harry figured that maybe that’s because it was summer, Murray had said that only half of them stuck around for the summer program. The students that were there seemed to be staring at Harry, though he thought that it could be chalked up to walking in with the Headmistress and being a stranger and all. Murray sat down at one of the tables furthest from the door, and motioned for Harry to sit down as well. There was a piece of laminated paper in the middle of the place setting, it was the menu for the meal. Murray gave a cursory look at the menu and gave her order to it, and a few seconds later eggs and toast appeared on her plate. Harry was relieved that it seemed to be just like the dinner at the Yule Ball two years back. He ordered pancakes, and seconds later was chowing down.

As he and Murray chit-chatted their way through breakfast, Heyman joining them halfway through the meal, Harry took the opportunity to look around. He saw that none of the students were wearing robes, they wore t-shirts and jeans for the most part. There seemed to be all ages represented, and by 8:20 practically all of the summer students were in the room.

“What’s the dress code around here?”

“During the summer it’s like you see, though the hardier students will wear shorts on some days. It generally doesn’t get super hot around here, so you won’t have to worry about that too much. During the school year it’s coats, ties, and slacks for the boys. Do you have any of those with you?”

“No ma’am. I grew out of my old stuff from Hogwarts, and once I knew I wasn’t going back, I had some fun with Incendio.” He said this with such a pleased face that both Murray and Heyman cracked up.

“No matter, we’ll get you down to Milwaukee at least once to get you sorted out, you’ll need to get your books in any case. This might sound like a silly question, but how are you fixed for money? I know your lawyer said that you could easily pay the fees.....”

“Oh I’m fine Professor Heyman, my parents left me well off, and my godfather even more so. I’m not really a spendthrift type, but this is the first chance I’ll have to spend some cash, so I’ll probably treat myself to a few things when I get the chance. Nothing outrageous though, I promise I won’t call undue attention to myself that way.” Heyman looked impressed yet again, Harry didn’t know that he was the more skeptical of the two about Harry coming over. It was his job to monitor international wizard news, Harry’s rather uneven press coverage in Britain had not gone unnoticed by him. The kid was coming off very well though.

Breakfast was now breaking up, as 9 am was the starting time for the first of the Creatures’ classes, as well as the tutoring. Murray motioned for Harry to stay in his seat as she went over to a girl who was getting ready to leave. They spoke for a few seconds, and Murray led her over to Harry’s table.

“Harry, this is Sophie Weir, we’re going to have her show you around today. Sophie is a junior in Cortez House. Sophie, this is our newest student, Harry Potter.” Harry got up and shook hands with her. She was about three inches shorter than he was, with dark hair, and was pretty in a relatively understated way.

“Nice to meet you Sophie.”

“Likewise Harry.”

“Sophie, please give him the complete tour. I’ll let Professor Palmer know what you’re doing and not to expect you this morning. Take your time, use the day if you need to, introduce him to any stray students and teachers you come across.”

“Yes ma’am I will.” Sophie in fact looked rather nervous, and Harry quickly decided to pretend that she was Hermione with an American accent, so he looked pretty calm.

“See you two at lunch.” Murray walked away, leaving the two of them in the now empty dining hall.

“So when did you get in?”

“Last night, Professor Murray picked me up at the airport.”

“Everyone in the room seemed to be wondering who you were, though no one at my table guessed right. Professor Murray and Professor Heyman are pretty approachable, but they usually don’t have students sit with them at meals.” Harry chuckled.

“At least I wasn’t imagining it then. I have an idea that will cut some tension here, if you like.”

“Shoot.”

“Let’s agree upfront that whatever you tell me about the school and the teachers will not be shared by me with any teachers.....or anyone else that you say not to.” Sophie smiled with some relief, and it seemed to relax her a little.

“Agreed Harry, that’s a plan. Now is there anything in particular that you want to see first?”

“Well you know I would like to see what the place looks like from the outside.”

“You portkeyed in I take it?”

“Yeah, it was wild. I’ve done a lot of portkeying the last week or so, but not by car, though your garage is a nice one.”

“Our garage Harry, remember, you go here now. I did the car thing right after my first year, I threw up. That was my first portkey completely, not fun.”

“My first was on the way to the Quidditch World Cup two years ago.....nobody told me how to land. Come to think of it, nobody has told me how to land out of the floo yet either.”

“It’s worse for girls, trust me, the dust gets in our hair something awful. Scourgify isn’t as thorough on hair as it is on other things.” They walked out of the dining hall and through the north hallway, which led to a set of double doors.

“I can imagine. So where’re you from?”

“I’m from Springfield, Illinois. Where in England are you from? You are from England right? That’s what your accent sounds like.”

“Yes, I’m English. I was born in Wales, but I was raised in Surrey, the town I grew up in is about an hour’s drive from London.”

“We all read about the attack on you last week, I doubt any of the students figured on you showing up here though.”

“Apparently Professor Murray and my old Headmaster don’t get along, from the year that she taught at Hogwarts. I was already planning to leave though, the day of the attack.....has it already been a week now? Sheesh, time flies I guess. Anyway, the day of the attack is when my advisor picked this place for me, and he talked with Professor Murray the next night. I was the souvenir she brought back from her trip.” Sophie giggled at that, which comforted Harry that he wasn’t talking too much. They walked outside a few meters and Harry turned to look at the school.....and it was just how Murray had described it, just a five story, very wide building that looked like a factory.

“Well that’s definitely not a castle.”

“No it isn’t, but I don’t think we could have a castle here, it would attract too much attention. I’ve seen pictures of Hogwarts though, it looks cool on the outside.”

“It is on the inside too, very old world.....at least compared to my muggle primary school anyway. I spent the first month getting lost almost every day.”

“That won’t happen here, trust me. The classrooms are all together, and the dorms are easy to find too.” They had continued to walk around the building, and Harry noted that there didn’t seem to be any other entrances than the one they had used.

“What am I taking you away from? Professor Murray mentioned a Professor Palmer?”

“He’s one of the Transfiguration teachers, I’m getting some tutoring from him.”

“Transfiguration’s not one of your strengths?”

“It’s the weakest of my wand classes. I got O’s in all three, but I’m better at Charms and Defense.”

“I got an E in Transfiguration, and O’s in the other two, so it looks like we’ll have a couple of classes together at least.” Sophie smiled, and Harry was becoming more relaxed around her by the minute. Everyone seemed to smile a lot around here he noticed.

“Did you qualify for Wandless Magic?”

“I did, and I can’t wait. Hang on, if you got an O in a class, you can’t need that much tutoring can you?”

“I needed something to do this summer while I’m here, and I usually do a different one each time. Last summer was History and Charms, and I still might do History next summer, I’ll take the NEWT anyway.”

"You don't want to go home?" She hesitated for a second, and Harry held up his hand.

"I'm sorry if I got too personal, I don't want to force you to share a confidence."

"No, it's okay Harry. You seem like a nice guy, and the whole world knows most of your story, which I'm sure you love. The thing is, I'm not welcome at home, so I've been here every summer." Harry remembered that Murray had mentioned something about students like this.

"You're muggleborn I'm guessing."

"Right, and my parents were fine with it at first. We got the letter, and then Professor Lyman came by a couple of days later to explain everything to us.....he's one of the History teachers by the way, not that you'll have him. They reacted much as anyone would who's been told their little girl is a witch, but they seemed to accept it. I have two older brothers and they're not magical, they thought and think that it's pretty cool, not that they'll admit it in front of mom and dad. I got my books and stuff in Milwaukee and they sent me off to Great Lakes." Harry could easily guess where this was going next, the same thing had happened to a few of his classmates at Hogwarts.

"And then they started thinking about it?"

"I guess that's what happened. I went home for Christmas break and they were a little distant, but there weren't any incidents or anything. We never were big on writing to each other, so I didn't have a hint of what came next until I got home for the summer. They sat me down the night after I got home and explained that they just couldn't handle the idea of me being a witch. They told me that I had to choose between them and magic. If I went back to Great Lakes I wouldn't be allowed to come back home."

"It doesn't take a genius to figure out which you chose."

"No, though I tried to talk them out of it for days. I even had Professor Rydell come and talk with them, he was the Headmaster before

Professor Murray, this was just a couple of weeks before he retired. The creepiest thing is how calm they were about it, it was like they weren't mad about the whole thing, but that they're minds were totally made up. They kept repeating the same rehearsed speeches over and over. If I didn't know better I would have sworn that they were under Imperious, but Professor Rydell assured me that they weren't."

"I'm sorry Sophie, that's a hard choice to have to make."

"Professor Rydell told me that I could come back to Great Lakes even if they didn't want me to, and that I would have a home here as long as I was a student. I don't know, I just couldn't get over the fact that they wanted me to deny who I was. I love being a witch, I love the fact that I have this kind of special power inside me. It's like a gift, and I just couldn't give it all away right as I was learning to use it properly. I left that day with Professor Rydell, and I haven't been back since. That was how I took the trip in the portkey car, with my spectacular hurling afterward."

"Have you talked with them at all since?"

"I send them cards on their birthdays and Christmas, but there haven't been any replies. I'm still in touch with my brothers, one is in college and the other just graduated from high school. They tell me that nothing has changed at home, my parents won't even talk about me."

"Are there a lot of students here with that kind of situation?"

"Probably a couple of dozen or so, give or take. You'll meet most of them during the next few days." Harry shook his head disgustedly.

"I give my aunt and uncle credit for one thing now, at least they never pretended to love me. I think what happened to you was worse."

"That doesn't happen at Hogwarts?"

"Not that much no, or at least it doesn't get talked about much.....I'm sorry, that's not meant as criticism, I'm glad you told me (she nods her head to indicated that she doesn't take it as

criticism for being overly personal). You see we're not encouraged to get to know students from other Houses, and my situation was considered pretty unique in my House. In my year in Gryffindor there was only one truly muggleborn student, my friend Hermione. Her parents seemed to take it pretty well from what I gather, although I guess Hermione didn't tell them much. Another student, my now former roommate Dean, was in a similar situation to me, growing up muggle but having magical relatives. Though his mum loved him and thought it was pretty cool that he was a wizard. But you can kind of tell by who stays at school during Christmas. Until last year I always stayed, and Hermione and my other best friend Ron stayed with me, so I wouldn't be by myself."

"That was very nice of them, are you going to miss them being all the way over here?"

"They're the only thing I'm going to miss about Hogwarts Sophie, them and Ron's sister Ginny, and my other friends Luna and Neville, although I only really became friends with Ginny and Luna last year.....okay, I'll miss the castle, it is prettier than this place on the outside." The cut from serious to funny left Sophie a little nonplussed, then she started laughing along with Harry.

"Let's go see the athletic field next shall we?"

"You lead I'll follow."

In no particular hurry, they strolled around the building and headed over to a stadium that appeared from a half mile away to be about half the size of the Hogwarts Quidditch field. There were no other students out and about, though it did seem to Harry to be good flying weather.

"I don't suppose you would tell me what the Sorting is like?"

"You really want to know? Half the fun is the surprise of it all."

"I've been through one Sorting like that, but if you really think it would spoil things for me...."

“Oh all right, its kind of like how you choose your wand in a way. What you do is you sit in special chairs that kind of evaluate you, each House has a chair. If you are the right fit for that House, then the chair lets out a hum and it glows right away. If it doesn't do that, you get up and go to the next chair. The chairs are placed at random every year, and I was lucky that my first chair was Cortez, which is where I wound up.”

“But you were scared at first that none of the chairs would glow for you, weren't you?”

“Absolutely, the chairs are connected somehow, and everybody fits in best in one of the Houses. So it's not just like if the first three chairs don't take you, then you get stuck in a House by default. It's like the chairs come to a decision when you're on the first one, only they draw it out for the suspense. I didn't know that at the time though, and since Weir is near the end of the list, I was totally freaking that I would be the only one who didn't get a House.”

“That sounds pretty interesting, I'm glad you told me about it.”

“What's the Sorting at Hogwarts like?”

“They stick an old hat on your head, and you have a mental debate with him about what House he'll put you in. Or at least the hat makes it seem like a debate anyway.”

“If it's a hat, how do you know it's a him?”

“Because it speaks with a male voice, a quite sarcastic voice to tell you the truth. Sometimes it takes two seconds, with my friend Neville it took a couple of minutes.”

“How long did it take with you?”

“About a minute, though it seemed longer. I had to talk the Hat out of putting me in Slytherin House, though I think it was toying with me when it threatened to.”

“They’re the Dark House, right? They’re mentioned sometimes when the history books talk about you.” Harry closed his eyes for a second, and almost walked into the fence surrounding the Quidditch/Quodpot field.

“Oh that’s just great, I’m in American books too?”

“Well you’re mentioned a few times, and there’s a lot of gossip in The Chronicle when things go all weird over there.”

“The Chronicle is the wizard newspaper here I take it?”

“It is, and most of us here get it. They have a section devoted to international wizard news, and so we hear of you from time to time.” That brought up something Harry was curious about.

“May I ask another personal question?”

“Sure.”

“Your parents have cut you off, so that presumes that they won’t pay for school. How do you afford it here?”

“Oh I’m on scholarship now, sort of. You see school is free, it’s paid for by the government. From what I’ve heard, I guess they hold the patents to a few useful muggle items.”

“Like what?”

“The only one I’m sure of is the CD, but I’ve heard there are car parts too, and something they use in airplanes. However it works, it replaces a lot of taxes that we would otherwise pay. It’s hard to collect taxes anyway, since our businesses are so intertwined with muggles. The scholarship I have is designed for kids like me whose parents are problems. It pays for my books and supplies, and gives me enough spending money to get by. How did you pay for Hogwarts, your muggle family helped you?”

“Well they gave me a ride to the train station once, does that count?” Sophie looked a bit appalled.

“Not really, no.”

“Then they gave me no help. My aunt and uncle hate two things more than anything in the world: magic, and me. My parents left me an inheritance, they took the school fees out of that, and my aunt and uncle weren’t savvy enough to wonder how I was paying for all of it. I withdrew a little of it to pay for books and other supplies, I haven’t really used it for much else until this past month or so. I had to throw some money around to get my freedom.” He told her the high points of his emancipation experience as they walked into the middle of the field. Most people would hesitate at telling all this to someone they had just met, but Harry’s instincts told him that it would be okay to tell Sophie. If one thinks about it, Harry’s good instincts on wizard friends had been evident from jump. The first two magical kids he’d ever met were Draco Malfoy, who he had immediately sized up as bad news; and Ron, who he had bonded with right away. They sat down in the middle of the field while Harry finished his emancipation story.

“So do you feel any different, being legal?”

“Not really, though it was weird to be able to do magic in the Dursley house.”

“I can imagine, I was only home a few days, but I didn’t do any magic at my parents’ house.”

“You have the same underage laws?”

“Even worse than yours really. Every house in the U.S. with wizards in it is warded to detect Kindred and Lycans, and it’s also warded so that once an underage puts their wand down at the beginning of the summer, you can’t pick it up again unless the Kindred/Lycan wards are tripped, or two months pass, whichever comes first.”

“Wow, and I thought things were looser around here, in regards to kids doing magic and all.”

“They feel that kids are kind of undisciplined, and would be too tempted to show off, especially around muggles.”

“Nobody’s thought of a loophole?”

“Nope, the only one is the obvious one, to never let your wand leave your hand, which of course isn’t too practical.”

“A good reason to stay the summer here, you can use it all you want.”

“It’s a perk, and more kids are taking advantage of it. My first summer here we only had twenty students staying, now it’s almost triple that. Not all of them are muggleborns either.”

“Professor Murray told me that there isn’t much rivalry between the purebloods and the muggleborns, was she right?” After all, a teacher might not notice subtle things.

“For the most part. I think the big difference is money, I can’t think of one pureblood student that isn’t from a rich family. Most of them have enriched themselves at the expense of the muggles over the years, to the point that you have to be a pretty limited wizard not to become rich after you leave school.”

“What do you want to do after you leave here?” Sophie looked pensive while thinking about how to answer that.

“I don’t know Harry, and that bothers me a little bit. Nothing really has presented itself as obvious, I guess I’ve just been hoping for my calling to just leap out at me.”

“Will you go to muggle university after this?”

“I would need another scholarship, which is possible, but I don’t know.”

“That’s the one thing I think the muggles do better than us, they don’t force kids that are 16 years old to decide the course of the rest of their lives. I’m the same as you, I couldn’t tell you right now what I would do. I know I could probably play Quidditch, or work in the joke shop with the twins.....but I don’t know if either of those things are what I’m going to be doing, or even what I want to do.”

“At least you have options, and neither of them sound so bad.”

“Oh you can work at WWW too, I’ll get the twins to open up an American branch.” She made a face at him, but saw that he was smiling, not laughing.

“Funny Harry.”

“Trust me Sophie, those two will make that business a success, and once they do, they’ll need to expand. I have some of their stuff in my trunk, I’ll show it to you later if you want.”

“It’s better than Zonkos?” Zonkos was a worldwide distributor, though the company headquarters was based in Great Britain.

“We think so, but we’re all biased. I’m interested to see what you think of their work.” He verbally described a few of the items, and Sophie surprised him by being most interested in the portable swamp, of which he had brought a few in the trunk. He didn’t really have a plan for using any of the items, but thought that he could get the twins some business from his new schoolmates. They had helped him out a lot this summer, and he wanted to pay them back.

It was a nice day too, Harry noticed. The temperature was around 75 degrees (a bit above average for that time of year in the U.P.), and the sun was out. Harry was laying on his back, soaking in the sun while they talked, Sophie was sitting with her legs crossed as they chatted. Harry felt very much at peace at this moment, and was moved to say so to his guide.

“This is nice, very relaxing.”

“Yes it is, should I feel bad that I haven’t showed you much? All we’ve been doing is trading stories.”

“Well Professor Murray said we had all day. I don’t want to keep you or anything, if you’re bored.” She shook her head and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'm not bored at all, trust me. This is cool, getting to know someone from a different culture. The fact that you're nice is a good bonus."

"You're nice too, Professor Murray knew what she was doing when she picked you as the tour guide. Do you get a lot of transfers here?"

"Not too many, no. We occasionally get one from one of the other American schools, when their parents move, but that's usually only one or two a year, if that. You're the first foreign student that I can think of, outside of one from Canada that joined our year back in Apprentice year."

"Apprentice year?"

"That's how we do the years. Your first year is the Novice year, then Freshman, Sophomore, Apprentice, Transition, Junior, and Senior. It's hard to remember at first, but you'll get used to it. You and I are Juniors, at least we will be in a few weeks. And while Sophomore usually denotes a second year, with us it's the third for some reason."

"We just did First, Second and so on."

"Probably just an instance of changing things so as not to be too like Hogwarts. I hear they call them First, Second, Third like that at Salem too."

"Do you ever meet the students from the other three schools? Heyman and Murray told me about the Olympics, is that school-wide or do you have it with the others?"

"Just within the school so far since I've been here. They used to do it every four years with the other schools, like with the muggles and their Olympics, but there were always allegations of cheating. The four schools are pretty serious rivals, they all want the most funding, which they think will result in them having the best students."

"I would think that they'd all get equal funding, just split the pie four ways."

“Don’t apply logic to it Harry, you’ll only make yourself crazy. Salem gets the most because they’re the flagship school of sorts, plus they have all the East Coast purebloods, so they get a lot of donations. You see our Quidditch stadium here, theirs is three times this size. The other schools get about the same money from the government, a little over 20 percent each.”

“I noticed that the stadium seems a bit small, though ours isn’t as big as Salem’s. Do you play Quidditch?”

“I’m not on the team, but it’s fun to watch. I don’t play Quodpot either, but like with Quidditch I go to all the games. They’re a big social event, and the place clears out when they happen. I’ll fly every once in awhile when I need stress relief, but I’m not great at it. There are couple of students in each House who play both Quidditch and Quodpot, and you can easily make them out because they tend to look exhausted by the end of Fall term, from all the practicing and the pressure of the games.”

“I haven’t flown in almost 10 months now, it’ll be nice to do it again.”

“Why haven’t you flown?”

“One of the Death Eater wannabes said some nasty things about Mrs. Weasley, so Fred and I attacked him. Umbridge, who was the hag more or less in charge of the school at the time, got us banned, and nailed George too for good measure. We had to sit out the last two games of the season, and she snatched my broom. I only got it back at the end of the school year.” Sophie seemed to react much as Hermione did to this story: not pleased that Harry had attacked a student, but impressed that he had done so to protect a woman’s name. The second reaction ultimately won out though.

“That was nice of you, kind of noble actually.”

“I’m not a total barbarian. Mrs. Weasley was pretty mad about it, but she calmed down after awhile. She’s more like an aunt than I ever had in Little Whinging, not that I’ve ever really known what a mother was. The twins weren’t going to go pro anyway, they had it on the brain to start the joke shop. I still don’t know if Molly knows that I gave

them the startup money, I'm sure I would have gotten a Howler by now if she had."

"Yeah, those twins sound pretty wild. My mother would have locked my brothers in the basement if they'd shown signs of acting as your twins did."

"Oh Molly tried, believe me.....though they don't have a basement in their house, just an attic with a ghoul in it.....don't ask. From what I gather, Charlie is kind of wild too, he just doesn't have a twin to multiply his mayhem with. Percy is incredibly buttoned down, he's kind of the odd-ball in a strange way. Ginny is the best parts of Fred and George, with a lot of her mother in her too. Bill is the genius, and Ron is the.....well I think Ron's the one who has never found his true niche there. I think a lot of the time his niche has wound up being 'best mate of the Boy Who Lived', and that's not very healthy for anyone." During his emancipation explanation he had told her the roles of the various Weasleys in the drama.

"You say your family doesn't love you, but listening to you talk about the Weasleys, it sounds like they're your real family."

"In a lot of ways they are, and your next question is going to be 'but how can you leave them Harry?' (Sophie nodded as if she was thinking exactly that). And a valid question it is too, except for the fact that I don't want them caught in the middle of my fight with Dumbledore. I mean I know they will be anyway to a point, but Dumbledore and I would have come to blows at some point this school year, and I don't want them to have to pick sides like that."

"Blows literally or figuratively?"

"Well figuratively we already have, and if Peter and I hadn't done such a good job of keeping my plans hidden, he would have stopped us. Literally? I could only take him out if I completely got the drop on him, and even then I wouldn't like my chances. Same for Voldemort really, I only survived against him by luck. I'm not ready to duel with either of them, and since I want the bad guy dead, and the supposed good guy to leave me alone, I thought it best that I move away for a time."

"Is another reason that you don't want the distraction when you do come to blows with this Dumbledore guy?"

"Pretty much, though I don't see what he can do about all this now. That's one reason I bolted from there as soon as I could, I didn't want to give him any time to think properly. It's pretty funny if you think about it, he lost a game that he had no real idea he was playing in until it was almost the end."

"Very clever." Harry stuck his tongue out at her.

"Well I'm not used to being the clever kind of person Sophie, it's a new feeling that I'm starting to enjoy. Before this I've always been the 'charge in' type, and other people have had to clean up my messes. Not this time though."

"So you won't charge in anymore?"

"Never say never, but I know that I'm 100 times happier sitting in the middle of this pitch right now than I would be if I was locked up at my relatives' house. If I had charged into that I would have been caught, and things would have been worse. I'm starting to learn perspective, and it's about time too."

"I'm glad for you, and for us too. We won't have to deal with the tortured hero type that we read about in The Chronicle."

"Very funny, and no you probably won't."

"Do you figure you'll stay here, after you finish school?"

"Heck if I know, I haven't even been here 24 hours yet. I suppose a lot of it will depend on how things sort out back in Britain." She noticed that he didn't use the word 'home' when talking about Britain. They sat there in a companionable silence for a few minutes, and Sophie started to think that maybe she should continue the verbal tour a bit.

"So what else would you like to know about school?"

“How do the classes work, and why are there two teachers for each subject.”

“The classes are set in blocks, you have each one two times a week for about three hours or so. The teachers alternate years teaching the classes. For example, in Transfiguration the two teachers are Professor Palmer and Professor Washburn. Professor Palmer taught our year during Novice, Sophomore, and Transition Years (first, third, and fifth at Hogwarts), and Professor Washburn taught us during the other two. It’s different during the last two years though, as the more senior teacher handles the advanced classes, and the junior one does the regular. So I’ll have Professor Palmer for the next two years, while you’ll probably have Professor Washburn.”

“Probably?”

“Well the top student in the regular class at the end of junior year is promoted to the Advanced class if that’s what they want. There’ll be a lot of competition for it, since pretty much everyone takes Transfiguration, but you would have a shot.”

“What other classes are you taking?”

“Charms, Defense, Ancient Runes, and Wandless Magic. I only got an E in Runes, so I’ll just be doing Advanced in Charms, Defense and Transfiguration. I guess Wandless is Advanced by definition. What about you?”

“Pretty similar to yours: Charms, Defense will both be Advanced, Transfiguration, Muggle Studies, and Wandless Magic. You’re not taking Potions?”

“No, I’m terrible at it, and some of those smells just make me too sick to my stomach. I think the only reason I got an E on my OWL was because of the written part, I know I did badly on the practical.”

“I got an A on my Potions OWL, and I was grateful to get that high a mark. I never seriously considered taking it here, I don’t care how good the teachers in it are.”

"Oh the teachers are fine, they're pretty careful to make sure that you don't blow up anything."

"Are there any teachers who behave like I've described Snape?"

"Not really, I don't think that Professor Murray would tolerate it if they tried. Her big deal is respect and cooperation, and if you're snotty to a teacher she'll give you detention quicker than your head can spin."

"What about points? Over there they took off points for stuff like that too."

"That sounds pretty dumb, penalizing the whole House for one person's misbehavior."

"I guess they figure that the other students will keep the troublemakers in line." She gave him an ironic smile.

"Did it work on you?"

"Yuck, yuck. And yes it did to a point, there were a lot of stunts that I didn't dare try because I wanted us to win the House Cup. Oh boy, a year with no Voldemort types, no overbearing Headmasters, and no Snape clones.....what am I going to do with myself?"

"My friends and I can throw things at you sometimes if you want." Oh good, a sense of humor.

"As long as I can take you up on my broom and drop you in the nearest Great Lake.....as a show of school spirit of course."

"You and how many of your little boyfriends?" Harry made a point of shifting a few feet further away from her.

"Uh oh, I've picked on trouble I see. Do I need my wand out?"

"Nah, I won't let anyone pick on you during your first day here, even me."

“Thank Merlin for small favors.” Sophie grinned at him, and got to her feet.

“Come on, we’ve lazed around here long enough. I should show you more stuff, but we can go flying later if you want.”

“I’d like that, where are we off to now?”

“We’ll go back inside, I’ll show you some of the classrooms. There’s not much else to see outside but the Care of Magical Creatures area, and they probably won’t want us disturbing class right now. By the time we’re done with that part of the tour, it’ll be time for lunch. I’ll show you our House Lounge before we go flying.” They again took their time on the walk, though Harry was feeling pretty refreshed after his long sleep, he had somehow fought through jet lag. They got to the front door and Sophie led him down the hallway away from the dining hall. They walked into one of the rooms, leaving the door open behind them. Harry looked around at what looked like an ordinary muggle classroom.

“At least it’s not musty, and it all looks very functional.”

“I think they bought all the furniture on sale or something, we are a publicly funded school you know.”

“Is your government nearly as incompetent as ours though, that’s the question.”

“It’s not that bad I guess, Congress is like governments all over really. There’s a scandal every now and then, but they mostly stay out of things. They pretty much just monitor the schools, and deal with the muggles, Lycans, and Kindred.”

“Where is the capitol? Washington D.C.?” Harry didn’t remember much from social studies class when he was 10 years old, but he remembered that that’s where the U.S. government was located.

“No, it’s in Boston, so it can be somewhat closer to Salem.....the school isn’t actually in Salem, it’s about 100 miles to the west, so it

can be kind of out of the way. Hard to have a Quidditch/Quodpot field in the middle of a suburb.”

“I would think so, otherwise you could put a school wherever you wanted.”

“Yeah, Tecumseh is in the middle of an Indian reservation, the muggle authorities are never around there. Pathfinder is in the mountains in California, they have to do some memory modifying on some climbers every once in awhile. Where’s Hogwarts?”

“In northern Scotland, I’ve flown over it and there isn’t a town for kilometers other than Hogsmeade.”

“I’ve heard about Hogsmeade, we don’t really have anything like that here. Most of us live in the bigger cities, lot’s of places to put magical buildings and such.”

“Where do we get our school supplies?”

“Flackter Alley in Milwaukee is our source. There’re similar ones in San Francisco, Boston, and Tulsa near the other schools, and one in New York City as well. A bunch of us are going down next week to get our school books and stuff, you’re welcome to come with us if you want.”

“That would be great, but let’s make sure that your friends think I’m all right first.”

“Oh they will, I’m the most suspicious of the bunch, and you and I have hit it off. Most of the people I hang out with are here this summer, so you’ll meet them at lunch.”

“Are they all in Cortez?”

“Reiko and Warrick are, Claudia is in Shawnee. Those three are kind of my crowd this summer. Jonas is in Jefferson, but he’s not here this summer.”

“Another personal.....” She didn’t let him finish.

"No, I'm not dating Warrick or Jonas, and I don't swing the other way." They both started giggling.

"I was NOT going to imply that last part, I promise."

"That's easy to say now that I beat you to it. No, Warrick and Reiko are together, and Jonas and Claudia are too busy denying the inevitable to date each other. I'm perpetually single. What about you? Any broken hearts going to be on the ground back there?"

"Umm.....well....."

"So more than one I take it?"

"I hesitated because I don't know exactly. I'm not good with girls really, one date is all that's on my resume there."

"One? I would have thought they'd be all over you."

"They wanted to be all over the 'Boy Who Lived', and I've spent five years avoiding that guy whenever possible." Sophie had rarely been more impressed by a teenage guy in her life, hearing that statement. Most guys his age would have succumbed to the fame, but he didn't. She only let her approval show in her small smile.

"So back to your 'umm' 'well' beginning."

"For years Ginny had a crush on me, again due to the Boy Who Lived garbage, and while nothing at all ever came of it.....I'm not really sure it ever went away, though she dated a couple of guys last year. She's the only one who would possibly have a broken heart, but it wouldn't be for the right reasons."

"What about this Hermione girl?"

"Oh she and Ron have finally gotten together, after dancing around it for two years. They didn't bother to tell me, but his brothers eventually did."

“And you never had a thing for Hermione yourself.”

“Not really, no, though everyone assumed it would be me and her, and not her with Ron. The Daily Prophet, oh how I loathe them, wrote a lot of stories about the two of us during the Triwizard thing fourth year. They didn’t have a shred of accuracy, but that doesn’t stop our press in Britain. No, Hermione is too bossy for me, she probably rules Ron with a rod of iron. Merlin knows he needs some direction though.”

“So you want to be the boss then?”

“Not especially. Half the time at most, but I would prefer someone I agree with most of the time, and who agrees with me. It wouldn’t have been like that with Hermione.”

“Very enlightened of you, the idea over here is that most Europeans have male dominated marriages.”

“I don’t know about that, but the only wizard marriage I’ve seen up close is Molly and Arthur, and she runs that family in most every way. Besides, if I wanted to be the owner of my girlfriend, I’d have given in to the lure of the ‘Boy Who Lived’, no thanks.”

“You really hate that moniker don’t you?” Harry smiled and rolled his eyes.

“I’m the ‘Boy Who Lived’ because my mother deliberately stepped in front of a killing curse, period. I was 15 months old at the time, and totally oblivious to everything but my next feeding and my next bowel movement. I didn’t find out about any of that until almost 10 years later, and it’s made me uncomfortable ever since. I prefer to ignore it and think of my parents as the ‘Mum and Dad who died to protect their child’. The Boy Who Lived has been a millstone around my neck, and one big reason I’m here is to get rid of it once and for all.....except, as you tell me, in history books.”

“So we can’t taunt you about it?”

“Not if you want to live my dear Sophie. You’ve come all this way not to enjoy the benefits of your last two years here.” He said this in a totally deadpan voice that startled her until he started shaking with silent laughter. She gave him a shove as she started for the door.

“Come on Mr. Comedian, let’s get to lunch.” They left the classroom and ran into one of the teachers leaving the next classroom.

“Hello Professor Palmer.”

“Hi there Sophie, this must be Harry. David Palmer, Transfiguration.” Palmer was a very tall black man, with a deep voice and a friendly smile. He held out his hand to shake, and Harry’s hand disappeared in it.

“Harry Potter sir, pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine Harry, Professor Murray told us all on Monday that you were coming here, but I have to admit I was skeptical.”

“I had trouble believing it too sir, but here I am. Sophie tells me that I’ll have to work really hard so I can have you as a teacher next fall.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine here. If you want to get in on the tutoring, I have a few slots open.”

“That would be great sir, just tell me when and where.” Palmer considered this for a moment.

“Let’s start at 10 am on Monday, you can go right after Sophie. Is there anything in particular you need to work on?” Now it was Harry’s turn to think.

“Well I did a lot of theory reading this summer so far for Transfiguration, for the first tutorial maybe we could go over it to make sure I have a handle on it.”

“That would be fine, the theory is the backbone of any wand work. Bring the book you used to study and we’ll go over it.”

“Great sir, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Same here. Now I have to get to my office for a minute, I’ll see you two in the dining hall.” He strolled off toward the nearest staircase, and his footsteps could be heard going upstairs, presumably to the third floor office wing.

Sophie and Harry went back the way they came, and entered the dining hall. Sophie spotted her friends sitting near the door, and led Harry over to their table.

“Guys, I want you to meet Harry Potter, he’s going to be going here now.” There was a hushed silence as her friends (and the other tables nearby) didn’t seem to know what to make of this news. One student at another table looked at him:

“You’re really Harry Potter?” Harry’s only response was to turn to him and lift the hair up off his scar.

“In the flesh.”

“Well the accent is a dead giveaway.” This was from one of Sophie’s friends, who stood up and introduced herself.

“I’m Claudia Cregg, this is Warrick Forrester and Reiko Aylesworth.” Claudia was at least an inch taller than Harry, with long brown hair. Warrick was a few shades lighter than Professor Palmer, and not much shorter. Reiko looked to have some Japanese in her, and was pretty small and petite. They all stared at Harry with friendly curiosity.

“Good to meet you all, Sophie has been telling me the most horrible things about all of you.” More deadpan, but Sophie was now getting used to this, elbowing him lightly.

“Don’t listen to him much, it’s the English sense of humor. Sit down Harry, before a duel breaks out.” He did as ordered, and soon a tray of sandwiches was in the middle of the table, with pitchers of what smelled like fruit juice to go along with them.

“So you’ve been stuck with Sophie all morning.....yet you’re still here? I don’t get that.”

“She’s already threatened me a couple of time this morning Warrick, I’d better not say anything about the tour.” The other three immediately turned to stare at her.

“Our Sophie? Threatened?” Reiko reached over and felt Sophie’s forehead. Claudia explained.

“Sophie is the one of the most shy girls I’ve ever met, I’m trying hard to imagine her threatening the legendary Harry Potter.”

“Twice Claudia, and I’m hardly legendary.....of course her threats involved you lot helping, so that might explain her boldness.” They nodded as if that made sense. The five of them chatted about what Harry had seen so far, and what else they thought Sophie should show him. Claudia and Reiko each had another tutoring session in the afternoon, while Warrick was playing in a muggle summer soccer league and had practice, but they all made plans to watch a movie in the Cortez House Lounge after dinner. Claudia explained (she seemed to be the leader of the group).

“Electricity is possible around here, but it’s pretty expensive, and not every room has it. Each of the House Lounges do, and some of the teacher offices do too, though some of the faculty don’t like it and won’t use it. The Lounges have it for the computers, though they won’t let us use the internet here, no phone lines here at school. We just use the computers to type our papers, it’s easier to correct things on them than on typewriters.” Harry had never used either a computer or a typewriter, and had only vaguely heard of the internet (mostly when covertly listening to the muggle newscasts between fourth and fifth years).

“It seems like I’m going to have to learn how to type. Is it hard to learn?”

“Not really, just takes some practice. Good thing you’re here a few weeks ahead of time, you’ll get plenty of practice. When Sophie

shows you the Lounge she can run through how to use one of the computers.”

“Sure, I was going to do that anyway. In fact we’ll do it right after lunch, I have to show him the best Lounge in the place.” Claudia rolled her eyes.

“This is what I have to put up with all summer Harry, listening to these three go on about Cortez House. Not that Jonas is much help in that regard, even if he were here.”

“Which House won the……what’s it called? The Carver Cup?”

“Jefferson House won it last year, which is why Jonas is little help there. He’s the star Quodpot player for Jefferson, he’s spending most of the summer working out with the junior national team.”

“It’ll be cool to see a Quodpot game, we don’t play it over there.”

“It’s mostly North American based, and the professional league is very popular. Jonas is the fortunate one, he’ll have no trouble getting a job right after school finishes. I’d be surprised if he isn’t the top pick in the draft. Are you going to play Quidditch for your House?”

“I’d like to, if I can make my House team.” He was a bit confused when they all started laughing. Warrick explained why.

“Dude, the best Brit teenage player will easily be able to make a House team here. The best athletes tend to play Quodpot, except for an elite few.” He mock preened, and Harry quickly surmised that he was one of those few.

“Such as yourself perhaps? You’ve got to be a Beater.”

“Right you are young Harry.” Said in a halfway decent imitation of a British accent, with a heavy Monty Python influence to it.

“That’s not half bad actually, you might even convince some foreign tourists with that accent.”

"I'm good with accents, I watched a lot of TV when I was a kid. Anyway, yeah I'm a Beater, I'm too big for the other positions really. I figured very early on that there wouldn't be much competition for the Quidditch spots, so I made the team my first year, and have been playing ever since."

"This is going to sound crass, but are you any good?"

"Well I'm a better soccer player if you want to know the truth, but I've never been in any danger of losing my position on the Quidditch team. I won't be going pro in either sport, let's put it that way." Harry looked at the two girls.

"Do either of you play?" Reiko looked up.

"I finally made the team last year as a Chaser, after Warrick bugged me to train harder. He'd goaded me into trying out two years before that, but I hadn't made it. Claudia and Sophie here are the watchers, they won't even try to play."

"Practices take too much time, it's more fun to just go to the games."

"How often do you practice?"

"Three times a week usually, they're just kidding Harry. There are rules in place to limit the number of practices. Plus, during snowstorms they're always cancelled, so you just do regular workouts in the gym."

"Yeah, I was going to ask about that. How bad does the snow get here?" Sophie shivered involuntarily as Reiko answered.

"Bad, Harry, there will be weeks on end that you won't be going outside for any reason.....unless you're a lunatic, like Warrick."

"Snowball fights are a lost art my dear girlfriend, just because I'm harder than the bunch of you. Harry, you'll come out with us won't you?"

“Sure, I love snowball fights.....though I’m a little worried about the contemptuous looks we’re getting right now Warrick.”

“I get those all the time dude, you’ll get used to it.” At that moment Harry had a mouthful of his tuna salad sandwich, during which he gave a silent thanks that these people seemed so cool. Heyman was just now entering the room, and stopped by their table.

“Hi there guys, how’s the tour going?”

“Great Professor Heyman, I’ve seen quite a bit.”

“Good deal, Professor Palmer says that you’ve already set up your first tutoring session.”

“Yes sir, Monday morning.”

“It’s good to see that you’re settling in. Come to my office tomorrow morning at 11 am, we have a few things to talk about.” Warrick seemed to be the funny man here.

“He’s in trouble already?”

“Ah yes, the legendary Forrester wit.....or at least half of it anyway.” The girls exploded with laughter, and Harry was biting his lip so hard he thought there would be blood flowing any second.

“No Harry isn’t in trouble, but there are a couple of things that we need to deal with about his former school. I have a couple of ideas about how to get your old Headmaster in line.”

“As long as they don’t involve me seeing him, I’m game.”

“They don’t, you need not have any direct contact with him as long as you’re here. Enjoy the rest of your day guys, I’ll see you tomorrow morning Harry.”

“Good day sir.” Heyman left for a table in the corner that had a few other faculty at it. Harry looked at them.

“Gee Warrick, he seems to like you a whole lot doesn’t he?”

“Vanish one chair with a teacher in it and you never hear the end of it.” The girls were giggling again, and Sophie explained.

“It was in Charms during Sophomore Year, we were practicing Vanishing Charms. Goomba here was supposed to vanish his own chair, but he ‘tripped’ and ‘accidentally’ vanished Professor Heyman’s.....putting him squarely on the ground. We almost had a riot that day, and no one was happier to see Professor Heyman promoted than our Warrick, so he wouldn’t have to have him this past year for Transition Year Charms.”

“That was a relief yeah.”

“Was it an accident?” Warrick adopted an innocent face.

“Wouldn’t you and a few hundred other students like to know.”

The rest of lunch was spent re-hashing Harry’s Snape fight, although he demurred from doing his quick draw right in the middle of the dining hall. A few other students came up to the table to meet Harry, and his scar got some subtle gapes when a few students were up close. The five of them parted ways a few minutes before 1 pm. Reiko was off to see Professor Palmer, and Claudia to tutor with Professor Lyman (she had explained that History was her passion, and she fully expected to ace the NEWT). Sophie, Warrick, and Harry walked up to the fourth floor, where Cortez and Proctor Houses were.

“How are you getting to practice Warrick?”

“Portkey, it takes me to about a quarter mile away from the field, and I walk the rest of it. See you two later okay?” He walked off to his dorm room to get his gear. Harry and Sophie walked into a large room, about three times the size of the Gryffindor or Slytherin Common Rooms (the only ones at Hogwarts he had been in). He walked back outside and looked at it from there.

“The beauty of magic, this place is huge.” The computers were on the left side of the room, what looked to be forty of them lined up against

the wall, with nice looking executive chairs in front of them. On the opposite side of the room were three big screen TV's, all surrounded by couches and armchairs. On the far side of the room from the door was the largest fireplace Harry had ever seen, and made the one in his now former Common Room look like it was a toy made of Legos. In the middle of the room were tables of varying sizes dispersed in a way that reminded Harry of the dining hall. Along the near wall on the door side were various other doors. It was roughly the size of the Great Hall in Hogwarts, not a bad size for an average House population of 80 or so.

"What are these other doors for?"

"Access to each of the dorm rooms. Each dorm room holds four students, and the rooms have their own bathroom. There's a door in each dorm room that leads you here, magically I guess, since there are a couple dozen rooms and only these two doors. The one on the left (of the door, facing the room) is for the girls' rooms, on the right is for the boys."

"Are the rooms halfway decent?"

"They're pretty good I guess, though I don't have much to compare them with. You can see mine when we're done in here."

"I'd be allowed in a girl's room?"

"Oh sure, guys and girls can go in and out of each others' rooms, though technically there are rules against anything....."

"Frisky happening?"

"Pretty much."

"Why 'technically?'"

"Because its pretty hard to get caught if you have cooperative roommates. The professors only check our rooms when there's been a complaint, otherwise they stay on the third floor. Mind you, once there is a complaint the guilty are toast because of Veritaserum."

"I see what you mean about cooperative roommates."

"I take it it's more strict at Hogwarts?"

"Very much so. The stairway to the girls' rooms is charmed so that boys can't go up it. Girls can come up to ours, but none of my roommates has ever tried it. I think it's just kind of assumed that you do your fooling around outside the dorm. Most of it happens at the Astronomy Tower, though I've never been there for that purpose."

"Right, you and your one date didn't go there?"

"She walked out right in the middle of it, so no." He told her about the Cho experience, and why it had been uncomfortable between the two ever since. After he was done, he realized that the only students of any kind who knew as much about his recent history as Sophie were Neville and Luna (since Ron, Hermione, and Ginny didn't know about most of the emancipation drama).

"You know, you've been told enough of my secrets that we have to be friends now." She gave him a bright smile.

"Well we don't have to be, you could Obliviate me."

"Sadly, I haven't mastered that spell yet.....though I would love to learn as I go with that spell, if you don't mind." Sophie's eyes went wide in mock horror.

"Nah, friends it is." She patted him on the shoulder, and he returned the gesture.

"I like your friends by the way."

"Our friends Harry, they seemed to dig you too. We need a sixth member of our circle, and it appears as though you have the job, I'm sure Jonas will go along with it."

"Not playing Quodpot should help."

“Let’s just hope the chair puts you in Cortez, you playing Quidditch with Reiko and Warrick will be cool. Now let’s go look at one of the computers.” She spent 15 minutes taking him through the procedure of turning on the comp and getting into the word processing program. She promised that she would get Reiko to teach him how to type, as she was a whiz at it apparently.

They left the room via the inner door and walked down a somewhat narrow hallway and stopped at a doorway after about thirty feet. Sophie waved her hand in front of it, and they walked in. The room was fairly large, with single beds along each of the four walls. What appeared to be the bathroom door was off in the far left corner. It was decorated very girly of course, lots of pinks and yellows.

“Nice room, very feminine.”

“I would hope so. My bed is over there (she points to the one nearest the bathroom door), and Reiko sleeps over there (the one on the far side). Kelly and Miranda, our other two roommates, aren’t here this summer.”

“Do you all get along?”

“I get along with both of them, but Miranda and Reiko have some issues.”

“I’m going to take a small leap and guess it involves the word ‘Warrick’”

“Well not in the way you think. Miranda never liked Warrick, but he spent two years trying to wear her down so that she would like him. Didn’t work, and he once he got the message, he got kind of snotty about it.”

“And now he’s with Reiko.”

“For the last nine months or so, the Christmas Dance was their first date, though they’ve been friendly for years. I guess words were said by Miranda to Reiko.....I wasn’t there, but things came a hair’s breadth from exploding.”

“So I would imagine that Miranda isn’t too ‘cooperative’ then.”

“Oh no, they have détente on that one, since Miranda has a boyfriend too. You haven’t met him either, he’s not here for the summer.”

“Good, so I won’t need to be in the middle for a few more weeks.”

“Middle? You’re squarely on our side there jethro.”

“Jethro? How on earth do your.....sorry, our.....friends think you’re shy?”

“It’s one of life’s mysteries.”

“I have four weeks to crack it though don’t I?”

“Try two years, it won’t get any harder once school starts.”

“Thank heaven for small favors, as soon as I get the others alone I’ll start digging.”

“Feel free. How did you get along with your roommates?”

“Well Ron and I met on the first train up there, and we became friends about as quickly as you and I have. Neville wasn’t part of our crowd until last year, and Dean and Seamus are good guys, but I don’t spend much time with them socially. I mean the five of us talked a lot at night, and I know more about West Ham football than anyone has a right to, Dean being a big fan.”

“Hopefully you’ll draw just as good a group here. How about we do that flying thing now?”

“Grab your broom, let’s go.” She collected her broom, which she explained was a gift from her other four friends for Christmas and her birthday two years earlier. It was a Nike broom, one that Harry had never seen before. They walked up a flight of stairs to get to Harry’s room. Dobby and Winky weren’t in sight as Harry got his Firebolt out

of his trunk, but Harry decided that the sooner they got used to Sophie the better for his sanity.

“Dobby! Winky!” They popped in, and were slightly taken aback at seeing a new person. To Harry’s amusement, they were each wearing a brand new Milwaukee Brewers t-shirt.

“You two and your clothing, no Dobby, I don’t want to know. Dobby, Winky, this is my new friend Sophie. Sophie, that’s Dobby, that’s Winky, they’re my……well my staff I guess.” The explanation of the emancipation hadn’t gotten so specific as to include these two.

“Nice to meet you Miss Sophie.” They both chimed at the same time.

“Good to meet you as well. What do you two do for Harry?” Dobby and Winky looked at each other for a second.

“Don’t worry guys, she knows what happened this summer. Winky is my photographer, Dobby threatens my enemies and handles my messages I guess.” The two of them nodded eagerly, and Sophie was instantly taken by them.

“Don’t laugh Sophie, he scared the crap out of Uncle Vernon, something I couldn’t do until last week. Speaking of messages, Dobby, go to Bill and find out if news of my plane ride has gotten out.” Dobby, whose face had gotten ugly as Vernon was mentioned, resumed his nodding.

“Yes Harry, when should I go?” Harry looked at his watch and calculated the time difference.

“Better go right now, it’s late evening over there and we don’t want to interrupt Bill and Fleur with……well we don’t want to interrupt them. If they don’t show up at his place, no big deal, we’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Yes Harry.”

“What shall I do Harry?”

“Whatever you want Winky, continue your exploring if you want to.” He wasn’t quite ready to share about the Map yet.

“Yes Harry.” The two of them popped off

“They’re cute, and for some reason they worship you.”

“It’s a long story, and while money is involved, it’s not the reason they work for me.” He told her of Dobby’s warnings four years earlier, and his help during the Tri-Wizard, as well as Winky’s role that year.

“Your life is like a fascinating book, you know that right?”

“More like a series if you ask me. Harry Potter and the.....oh no one would be that stupid.”

They grabbed their brooms and went off to the athletic field, stopping three times along the way as Harry met Josh Lyman, the History teacher (and the only one who went solo in his subject); Amy Allen, Professor of Ancient Runes; and Riley Poole, the school’s maintenance supervisor. Poole was a young version of Filch as far as Harry was concerned, one of the few true similarities with Hogwarts, though he was polite to the man.

Harry and Sophie flew for about an hour, most of it just casual flying. They had a couple of races, and while the Nike broom was fast, Harry on his Firebolt was faster. They switched brooms and Harry beat her again, but not by as much. Harry did a few dives and loop de loops and had a totally terrific time flying.

After getting back to school, they split up so they could shower. The entire gang collected Harry for dinner, and the promised movie afterward in the Cortez House Lounge. In honor of him they chose Monty Python and the Holy Grail, each House had a rather large collection of videos. They spent the rest of the night eating popcorn and swapping funny stories, with Peeves and the twins making up the bulk of Harry’s time. At midnight they said their goodnights, and since Claudia lived on the fifth floor, she walked up with Harry. As they got to her door, she stopped Harry.

“Harry, please be careful with Sophie okay?”

“Careful?” He knew what she meant, but wanted it out loud anyway.

“She likes you Harry, I can tell.” Well she had known Sophie for five years he thought.

“She’s only known me for a day Claudia.....admittedly a day where we spent 14 hours together.” This should be an uh oh moment as he realized this, but strangely he was unaffected.

“My point exactly Harry, and it sounds like she opened up to you, which usually takes quite awhile. And am I right in guessing that you shared some things with her too?”

“Sounds like you’re not guessing, but yes you’re right.”

“Now I know how little drama you must want in your life right now.....” Harry was not angry about this, but took pains to make sure he wasn’t looking like this was amusing to him either.

“No, please don’t go there. I took off to avoid becoming a martyr, not because I wanted an easy life with no remotely hard decisions to make. Look, I’m not going to tell you exactly how I feel about Sophie, since I don’t really know myself. For all intents and purposes the only private time I’ve had today has been in the shower, and I need more time to think than that. I’ll say this to you though: Anytime after lunch I could have begged out of the rest of the day, saying I was jetlagged or something.....but I didn’t, did I?”

“No you didn’t, and you’re not the only one who’s made that connection. Sophie is one of my closest friends, and I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve spent 14 hours with her in one day.”

“Claudia, I wouldn’t have wanted to spend my day any other way.” He walked off toward his room, leaving behind a thoughtful Claudia. It also happened that Claudia’s room was on the corner, and Sophie and Reiko had been about to round the corner, but had stopped when they heard what the two had been talking about. Reiko looked at her

now furiously blushing friend, but who also had a pleased smile on her face.

Saturday, August 3, 1996

11 am

Office of the Deputy Headmaster, Great Lakes

Harry walked up to Heyman's door, gave a knock, and was bade to enter.

"Good morning Harry, have a good night?"

"I did sir, it was movie night in Cortez House, I had a great time."

"I'm glad to see that you've made some friends already."

"So am I, I'm very grateful to Professor Murray for having Sophie show me around yesterday, they're a great group."

"Yes they are, even Forrester (Harry successfully managed not to smile). Now if I may ask, what communication have you had with Britain since you left?"

"None directly, but I sent Dobby to check with my friend Bill Weasley, to see if they knew I was gone."

"Did they?"

"Not until I was already here. They had a meeting yesterday.....well it was morning here I guess, Bill told them that I had left the country."

"And Bill is a student friend of yours?"

"No, he's my friend Ron's brother. He works at Gringott's Bank, I think he's about 28 years old or so. He was one of my advisors along with my solicitor."

“Okay, so they don’t know where you are at the moment, but that’s going to change very soon.”

“How?”

“One of your new classmates is going to let it slip to a family member, and sooner rather than later The Chronicle will be on our floor, wanting to confirm and talk with you.”

“What can we do about that?”

“We can be proactive Harry, that’s what we can do. We can leak the story ourselves, and control the story, in as much as it can be controlled.” Harry thought about this for a second.

“Are we talking a press announcement? Or just you calling an old friend who works for the paper?”

“That’s up to you really. The key thing to remember is that you’re not in hiding, you simply left an abusive situation back in Britain. That said, if we don’t jump on this now, it might look like you are in hiding, and I don’t think you want that.”

“No I don’t.....well I guess if it’s going to get out anyway, go ahead and prepare a press release. I will not sit down for an interview though, everything will be dealt with through you or Professor Murray.”

“That’s what I had in mind, we’ll dwell heavily on you being attacked by that Snape fellow, and how you’ve had to fight for your life every year you were at Hogwarts. It will play much better here than in Britain of course.”

“Will you intercept the Howlers for me?”

“Absolutely, we do that anyway. We don’t believe in school kids getting Howlers in any case. And based on what I’ve read about you in the Daily Prophet, I’m going to assume that you’ll get a few.”

“More than likely. I have another question for you. Bill’s note said that Dumbledore promised to leave me alone until I make contact with him.....which I won’t anytime soon. Now let’s assume for a minute that Dumbledore is full of it and actually shows up here to want to ‘talk’ with me. What will you and Professor Murray do?”

“We won’t let him interfere with your education here Harry, not for one minute. It will be a long trip to walk away empty-handed from, but he will walk away empty-handed. You don’t have to lay eyes on him if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t, and thank you. Oh yeah, one more thing. You read about the incident this past June where my friends and I fought some Death Eaters?”

“I did.”

“Their trial is the first week in October, and I need to testify apparently. I’m assuming I need to request permission to leave school for that, so I am.”

“Yes you would, and consider it granted. I’ll speak to Professor Murray about it, and when the time comes we’ll notify your teachers.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Now, one last topic, tutorials. Are there any others you would like to do besides Professor Palmer? Aside from Defense, which are filled up, not that you have a crying need for tutoring in that subject mind you.”

“Hmmm.....How about History? Claudia was telling me that she’s going to take the NEWT without the class, and the two history books I’ve read this summer were really interesting.”

“That will be no problem, Professor Lyman will have some slots open. Any others? Charms perhaps?”

“I don’t think so sir, not this summer. I want to get up to speed in Transfiguration and History before I tackle anything else too hard.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Well enjoy the rest of your weekend, we’ll see you on Monday.”

“Yes sir, you too.” With that, Harry got up and left the office. He went back upstairs and found Winky already at work on the blueprint, which so far included only the hallways on the top two floors. She had already been stopped by two house-elves on cleaning rounds, but Raffles had been sent for and her presence had been explained to the Great Lakes elf staff, which numbered over 300.

He looked at his watch, Sophie and her group were due to come get him in a few minutes for lunch. It had been explained to him that few students ate breakfast on the weekends, and most just took the opportunity to sleep in. Harry himself hadn’t gotten to bed until after 1 am, staying awake long enough to read Bill’s message, and compose one to be delivered back by Dobby. Bill had also told him that Hedwig was now on her way to him, and he made a mental note to find out where Hedwig would be staying here.

Knock Knock!

Harry shooed Winky and her blueprint off and waited a few seconds before saying:

“Come in!”

Sophie walked in, by herself it seemed. She hit him with the same nervous smile that she had when they had met the day before. Harry had thought quite a bit about what Claudia had said the night before, and he had done some frank examining of his own emotions as well. He was initially wary of showing any feelings for someone this quickly, and in a new place to boot.....but another part of him said to just seize the moment and be with someone he really liked. That was the no-brainer part too, he knew he had feelings for her. What he had told Claudia the night before was true, he had never really considered trying to cut the night short, indeed he wouldn’t have minded it going on longer.

“Hey Harry.”

“Hey Sophie, sleep well?”

“Not too badly I guess. How’d it go with Professor Heyman?”

“It was fine, though I’ll make up something to scare Warrick with.”
That brought out a laugh, though the nervous smile soon returned.

“What did he want?”

“He wants to do a press release, saying that I’m here and all.”

“That sounds kind of tacky doesn’t it? I wouldn’t think you’d want that.”

“Oh it’s okay, he wants to do it so it doesn’t look like I’m hiding over here. It’s not a half bad idea anyway, I would love to see the look on Dumbledore’s face when he sees it.”

“What did Bill say?”

“They didn’t know I’d left until he told them, and that he and Remus have supposedly talked the old man into not doing any more hunting for me.”

“Supposedly?”

“Dumbledore rarely takes anyone’s advice but his own. Oh well, whatever happens will be interesting. What are we doing today?”

“Lunch first, then I guess we could play a pick-up game of Quidditch if we can find enough people. I don’t think there’re any Quodpot players here this summer.”

“Sounds good, though I would like to see the Owlery sometime today. Bill wrote me that my Hedwig, my owl, is now on the way. She was with the twins in the shop for the last week, and I’m sure she’s pretty traumatized by it.”

“That’s cool, we can go by there on the way back from lunch, it’s in the basement.” Harry raised his eyebrows.

“There’s an entrance for them, and it’s charmed to keep out the cold during the winter.”

“Speaking of that, when we go to Milwaukee I’ll need some winter gear. Reiko scared me enough about the snow that I’m going to buy the thickest winter coat money can buy.”

“That’s doable, we’re going to want to go the muggle clothing stores ourselves anyway. We’ll find out our slot tomorrow probably.”

“Our slot?”

“Yeah, for the portkeys. They send us out there a few at a time, because they know we’ll be going into muggle Milwaukee. I guess they don’t want fifty-some teenage wizards wandering around getting into trouble.”

“Will we need our wands?”

“Well none of us are of age, except for most of the seventh years. If we get caught using the wands, we’ll be in more trouble than we can shake that stick at.”

“So I guess I’m the bodyguard for the trip eh?”

“Pretty much, if a Kindred comes after us we’ll need you to fight him off.”

“Well I would prefer that that not happen, but I will make sure nothing happens to you, at all.” A soft smile now, one that caused Harry to make an important decision.

“Thanks Harry.”

“And when we’re there, are we to be expected to stay in our group, or can we wander off?”

“We can wander off if we want, why?”

“Because then you and I can wander off together and have lunch, just us.” The look on Sophie’s face was so priceless, he knew he had to buy a pensieve and quick so that he could save it.

“You know, you don’t have to do that for yesterday, you said thanks already.”

“Oh I’ll be doing something else for yesterday.....not that I’ve figured out what yet, but count on something. Come on Sophie, I know you heard what Claudia and I were talking about last night.” Eyes goggling now.

“You knew we were there?”

“No, but I suspected it and you confirmed it. We really need to have a poker night tonight or sometime soon, I think you would bluff about as well as Dobby.”

“Huh?”

“Your nervous smile when you got here, I kind of figured. And when you say ‘we’?”

“Reiko and I, we were coming up to talk to Claudia.....well about you.”

“Because she’s the leader of the group.”

“More or less, yes.”

“So was she right? Do you like me?” It took all of Harry’s considerable bravery to ask this question, one that he had never asked before. More bravery was needed for her answer.

“Yes I do.”

“I like you too, and I would be honored if you would join me for lunch in Milwaukee, just the two of us.”

"I would love that." Harry sighed in relief, and heard some movement in the closet.

"Okay you two, the entertainment is over!" Giggles could be heard in the closet, and Dobby then shut it all the way.

"Nothing like an audience is there?"

"Better than Reiko, Warrick, and Claudia I guess."

"Oh that wouldn't have happened, I don't have that much courage Sophie. I'd have waited until a devious plan to get rid of them occurred to me."

"Yeah, they would have made things difficult."

"If it helps any, I wouldn't ask anyone out in front of Ron or Hermione either."

"It doesn't matter Harry, the important thing is we're going to lunch together."

"That is the key issue isn't it? Well let's go to lunch now with the others, and for the sake of my nerves let's pray that Milwaukee is on Monday." Smiles from both, and they briefly squeezed hands and walked down to lunch.

After lunch Warrick cajoled three other students into playing Quidditch with them, and Harry got his first game in a long, long time.....except that he wound up playing Beater, in a game with no Seekers (not enough people). He found that while he liked the adrenaline rush, he didn't like that he was just a bit small to hit the one bludger that they used during the game. Each time he nailed it used much more of his energy than Warrick was having to, and he was well exhausted at the end of the 90 minute game.

All throughout lunch and the rest of the day, Reiko, Claudia, and Warrick managed to avoid asking any uncomfortable questions about what Sophie and Harry must have talked about, but to them Sophie's

calm and constant smile were dead giveaways. There were no outward displays of affection between the two of them, but while they were at dinner, and afterward playing poker, they sat next to each other. Poker was played using Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, and Dobby (who Harry had introduced along with Winky to the other three) cleaned their respective clocks.....though he wasn't too happy when he bit into his first dark bean, expecting it to be licorice.....and getting tar instead.

The assignments for Milwaukee were handed out the next day, and the powers that be (Heyman and Murray) just assumed that Harry was going with his new friends. The five of them, along with six other students, were assigned to Tuesday. Heyman took Harry aside after dinner and told him that the press release would happen on Wednesday, arrangements had already been made with The Chronicle. Hence, Harry was going to Flackter Alley on Tuesday, so that he wouldn't be ambushed by any reporters or any well meaning nutballs who might ask uncomfortable questions.

On Monday Harry had his first tutorials with David Palmer of Transfiguration and Josh Lyman of History, and he hit it off with both. Both were impressed with Harry's frank admissions that he was somewhat wanting in their subjects (E and A OWLs notwithstanding). Lyman in particular was a stark contrast from his Hogwarts counterpart, he had a great sarcastic streak and Harry was not pleased that he wouldn't get to see this in class on a twice weekly basis for two years. Palmer was serious about his subject, but seemed much more relaxed than McGonagall. Harry automatically (and somewhat unwillingly) had taken to comparing his new teachers with his old ones, and he thought Palmer was much more like Sprout. The gang talked all through dinner about what their itinerary would be the next day. They were due to leave by portkey at 9 am, and the return trip was to take place at 6 pm.

Tuesday, August 6, 1996

Flackter Alley, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

They arrived in the middle a designated area in the northwest corner of Flackter Alley, two groups hanging on to baseball bats. The first

group was Harry's group, who were under Claudia's leadership, and the second group which was under the direction of Senior Year student Amelia Gardner. The leaders were responsible for the portkeys and for getting their group back at the appointed time. Gardner simply tossed her bat to a nervous looking Freshman to be and told him to carry it for the rest of the day, and heaven help him if he lost it. Harry, figuring that as the new guy he would have to carry the bat, used his wand to shrink it, and put it in his pocket. He looked to Claudia

"Where are we going first?"

"The bank first, Sophie and I have our money from the scholarships, but the rest of you need to.....or do you Harry?"

"I had some money transferred over on Monday from Britain, though I'm still getting used to the idea that we use muggle money here."

"Makes it easier for us to go into the muggle places and spend it. Blending in is the whole idea Harry." He remembered Heyman's lament about American wizards being too close to muggles and losing some of their wizard-ness in the bargain, and he had to agree with some of the sentiment.

"I can see that." The five of them moved off in the direction of the bank, which turned out to be a rather unassuming structure from the outside, but was cavernous on the inside. The goblins ran this bank too, and after he received his new key, Harry felt free to ask the goblin at the counter about this.

"Do goblins run all wizard banks around the world?" Said goblin looked at him with some surprise.

"All but in China, they have never trusted our kind." With his new found interest in history Harry would have liked to ask a few more questions about this, but there was a line behind him. He did have one important question though.

"At Gringott's in Britain my house elf was allowed to make withdrawals for me. Will that be the case here as well?"

“Yes it will Mr. Potter, as long as he has your key and a written note from you authorizing the withdrawal. For deposits you will only need the key.”

“Thank you sir.”

Harry, Reiko, and Warrick took their rides down the depths individually, as their vaults were all in different parts of the underground complex. Harry withdrew ten thousand dollars, having no clue about how much things cost here. He had asked questions of his friends of course, but the exchange rate was somewhat complicated. Add to this that Harry hadn't actually bought his school things personally in three years, and the cost of them then was one of life's details that had just slipped his mind. Once they were all back in the lobby, Claudia set the agenda for the rest of the morning.

“Let's do the easy thing first and get our books, then we can get Reiko and Warrick over to the apothecary to get their Potions stuff.”

They made the walk to Schuler Books to get their books and other materials. All five of them were taking the core classes of Defense, Transfiguration, and Charms, they only differed on the others. Reiko was doing Wandless and Potions, Claudia Arithmancy and Herbology, and Warrick was taking Potions and Ancient Runes. Harry wasn't pleased to find out he would be alone in Muggle Studies, but they assured him that the much talked about Jonas would be in there with him. Harry collected all his book, fourteen in total (including four history books), and was appalled at how much they cost (\$490), but really he got off pretty lightly. Warrick's Runes book alone cost over \$60, as did Claudia's text for Arithmancy. Harry shrunk all of the bags and put everything into one large bag.....and after playing rock, paper, scissors, Warrick had to carry it.

The apothecary was next, and more money was siphoned off. Warrick and Reiko were not on scholarship, but their well-off parents were traveling during the summer, which is why they had stuck around Great Lakes. Warrick had confessed to Harry that his uncle was a professional athlete in a muggle sport he wouldn't name, and thus kept him well-supplied with spending money. Reiko's parents

both taught at Tecumseh in Oklahoma, and she was not allowed to attend there, to avoid the possible appearance of bias.

The first three stops had consumed most of the morning, and Claudia called a break for lunch. After confirming that Harry still had the bat on him, they started throwing around ideas of where to go to eat. Harry and Sophie looked at each other, he cleared his throat.

“Umm.....Sophie and I are going to have to abandon you for lunch.” Knowing looks passed amongst the other three.

“Well, well, we were wondering when you would do something.”

“Wonder no longer Warrick, we’re going to go out into muggle Milwaukee and find a nice restaurant for.....well for our first date.” Reiko put her arm around Sophie.

“The first of many perhaps?”

“We can only hope.”

“I’m happy for you two, I really am.”

“Thanks Claudia, now if only you and Jonas can see the light.....my goodness it only took me a day to figure out who I wanted to take out.” Harry grabbed Sophie’s hand and they walked away to the sound of Claudia loudly protesting that she didn’t know what he was talking about. Sophie remembered something, and turned back to their friends.

“Oh hey, let’s meet at the gateway at 1:30 okay?” It was now 11:30, and they all agreed.

The two of them walked, still holding hands, toward the gateway, which turned out to be nothing more than an arch over the top of a normal looking wooden doorway. They exited in the middle of, ironically enough, West Michigan Street. The gang had explained to Harry that the government preferred its ‘Alleys’ to be in larger cities, and Milwaukee was twice as close to school as Detroit was, despite Detroit being in the same state as the school.

Sophie had been in this part of town on each of her book buying excursions over the years, and she knew of a good little Italian restaurant nearby called Mario's. She and her friends had passed by it each time, but they had never gone in (preferring fast food). It was still a little before the lunch rush, and they got a nice table in the corner.

"This is nice, I've always wanted to come in here."

"I love the smell in these kinds of places. Last week was kind of my tour of restaurants of London, I like them."

"I guess you didn't get much eating out growing up."

"Once a year on the average, when babysitter arrangements failed."

"You won't get much of that at school though, we're not encouraged to go into the nearby towns much. You know, strange teenagers around, people will ask questions."

"I can understand that, but the food at school is really good."

"Better than over there?" Harry had purposefully gotten out of the habit of using the name Hogwarts, and Sophie had soon started to do the same.

"Not better or worse, just different. Most of the dishes are different, so it's hard to compare.....and I tend to compare everything about there with here." The waiter arrived with their drinks, and they gave their orders to him. They kept the tone light throughout the next minutes, throwing out ideas about Claudia and Jonas, Sophie resisting Harry's pleas to go out for the Quidditch team with him, and doing some people watching. Their food came, a nice lasagna for her, stromboli for him, and they dug in.

"Harry, can I ask you something?"

"Does anyone ever say no to that question? You can always ask me anything Sophie."

“Why did you ask me out?” Well he wasn’t expecting that question for sure.

“Because I like you, you’re wonderful and sweet. Why did you say yes?”

“Because I feel so comfortable around you, and because you’re wonderful as well.”

“I’m not sweet?”

“Of course you are, I didn’t want to swell your head.” He stuck his tongue out at her.

“It’s at the normal size right now, I rely on my friends to keep me grounded. My British ones did a great job for five years, now you guys have to take over.”

“We will, don’t worry.”

“My girlfriend will have the hardest job of all though, so get ready.”

“So one date a relationship makes?”

“If you like, I only speak for myself on this, and for what I want.”

“My boyfriend Harry, that has a nice ring to it. I’m sure I’ll get to use it a lot when school starts as we introduce you to everyone.”

“My girlfriend Sophie.....who when word gets out will receive a mass of overseas Howlers. Welcome to my world.” Sophie started giggling.

“That was a yes by the way Harry.”

“Thank goodness, I would have moved to Australia if you had said no.”

“Sure you would have. I’m glad you’re here Harry.”

"Me too, and I know we're not rushing things Sophie. We've spent a ton of time together these past few days, more than most prospective couples do before they figure it out."

"I know.....well except for Jonas and Claudia." Harry grinned.

"I feel as if a great weight has been taken off my shoulders since I got here, it would have taken me much longer to work up the courage even to like you, let alone ask you out, if I was still over there. But now.....I just feel so relaxed, like normal teenage pressures will be nothing compared to what I've already had to go through."

"I wasn't sure how to tell you this, but I noticed that during your first day, it was like the pressure was just dripping off you the whole day, not to return. I have to ask this though: What if that war of yours over there heats way up, and you have to go back?"

"One, its not my war; two, I don't ever HAVE to go back there. Once school is done, then I'll choose where I want to live. A lot of factors will be involved, and the war will be a tiny one. Sophie, Voldemort is just one man, admittedly a very powerful one. There are 20,000 other witches and wizards over there, they can take him if they really want to."

"I'm sure they can, at least they don't have the Lycans and Kindred ready to go after them."

"Every society has it's challenges. Whatever happens Sophie, I'm not going to let anything happen to you. If something does, then I'll be dead on the ground with a large pile of bodies around me."

"That won't happen I'm sure, but it's nice to have someone who cares about me that much. I would be right there fighting with you too you know."

"Here's to never needing a demonstration." He raised his glass of Coke to hers, and they toasted. They left after dessert (they shared a piece of tiramisu), and slowly walked back the way they came. Before

they came in eye view of the gateway, Harry took her in his arms and held her for a moment.

“That was a lovely lunch Harry, thank you.”

“I had a wonderful time because of the company, that makes everything else better.” They kissed briefly and tenderly. Harry’s smile seemed permanently applied as he put his arm around Sophie, and they continued their walk.

As they approached the gateway, they ran into the other three just coming out. It looked as though they were exiting a small store, but as with The Leaky Cauldron, muggles seemed not to see it. Harry and Sophie had their arms around each other, and took another long ribbing about their new status, not that it bothered them. There was a large mall that was about a fifteen minute walk away, and they journeyed over there to get some new clothes. Normal wizard robes were not used in Great Lakes, except for special occasions, and Warrick had seen Harry’s and pronounced them adequate for the once or twice this year he’d need them.

The first stop was a men’s store, where Harry and Warrick could get their clothes. Harry had only grown a couple of inches in the last year, while Warrick had shot up three inches (Harry was about 5’6”, while Warrick was 6’2”), so they both needed new everything. The three girls put them through their shopping paces, with Reiko dealing with her boyfriend, and Sophie advising Harry. Claudia advised all of them, and was more or less the tiebreaker.....not that there were many disagreements, the two boys pretty much went along with everything the girls wanted. The whole thing took 45 minutes, and when it was said and done, Harry had two new suits, two more sport jackets, and a variety of shirts, jeans, and other things.

The girls went shopping next, and both of the boys declared that they would rather undergo emergency root canals than watch. Warrick went to the sporting goods store, and Harry visited an optometrist. The exam took quite awhile, and Harry left the muggle mail address for Great Lakes. He ordered two pairs of glasses, and a set of contacts. Warrick came to fetch him, and they went to get the girls. By now it was after 4 pm, and things were going to have to get

wrapped up soon if they were to make it back by the appointed time. The five of them spent some time in a video store, picking out some titles for future movie nights (they couldn't exactly run out to Blockbuster on a school night). On the way out, Harry spied an art store, and without saying anything swung in there. The store was full of prints of various paintings, and he knew what he wanted to do.

"Guys!" The other four came into the store, looking curiously at Harry.

"Sophie, last Friday you gave up your entire day so that you could show this strange foreigner around. I promised you I would do something for you for that, and here we are. Choose."

"Thank you was enough Harry, you don't have to do this." He gave her a quick hug, but his mind was not to be changed.

"It's not like I'm buying you a car Sophie, pick something out and hang it on your wall at school."

"Oh okay, thank you." She and Reiko (who would also have to look at it all year) spent 20 minutes looking around before Sophie spotted just the thing, a print of a Manet watercolor of a woman with an umbrella. It looked really great, and everyone agreed that she had to go with it. Harry paid for the print, received a kiss on the cheek for his trouble, and they all made it back to Flackter Alley with 15 minutes to spare. They went to the portkey area and waited for the appointed time, the other group arriving a few minutes later than they did. They popped off back to school, just in time for dinner.

Wednesday, August 7, 1996

The headline of The Chronicle was very descriptive:

Harry Potter Escapes Hogwarts, chooses Great Lakes as his safe haven

By Alan Berg, Senior Reporter

"We have just learned that Harry Potter, the iconic 16 year old British wizard, has withdrawn from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and

Wizardry in Scotland and has enrolled at Great Lakes Magical Institute for his final two years of schooling. A statement was released today by Great Lakes Headmistress Joanne Murray announcing Potter's new situation. Potter is not, and will not, be made available for interviews, Murray said, but she stressed a key point that it was Potter who contacted Great Lakes, rather than Great Lakes soliciting Potter."

"The reasons given for the transfer included the attack on Potter by Severus Snape, who was at the time the Professor of Potions at Hogwarts. Snape was found guilty of assault at trial last week, and sentenced to three years of house arrest. Said Murray in the statement 'Due to the unrelenting series of attacks against Harry, both mentally and physically, while at Hogwarts, he felt it would be best for his physical well-being and his sanity that he continue his education elsewhere.'"

"Readers of The Chronicle will remember that right before Snape's attack on Potter, the teenager was given his emancipation by the British Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, making him a legal adult. Word from a British source close to the situation indicates that Potter, who has a death warrant on his head by British Dark Wizard Lord Voldemort, expected an attack of some sort, and strongly suggested that it would come from Hogwarts. The source also implies that relations between Potter and Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore are now incredibly strained. The source further indicates that Potter holds Dumbledore personally responsible for not only the attack on him by Snape, but for most, if not all, of the various incidents at Hogwarts that have endangered his life over the last five years."

"British Minister Fudge was unavailable for comment, but his office did confirm Potter's emancipation and many of the reasons for it. Hogwarts Headmaster Dumbledore was also unavailable for comment, but our British source tells us that he was unaware of Potter's destination as of press time. It is a well repeated rumor that Headmaster Dumbledore and Headmistress Murray are not on a friendly basis, and this might have contributed to Potter's choice of school."

“We at The Chronicle will keep you our readers up to date as new developments occur. We will endeavor to obtain an interview with Harry Potter, and will apprise you of reaction from Hogwarts School and Great Britain as it happens.”

Everyone in the dining hall was reading the same article at breakfast, including Harry, who had a note attached to his paper saying his copy was on the Publisher. Heyman caught his gaze and raised his eyebrows in question.....Harry responded with a thumbs up, but he was mostly too busy daydreaming about how much this would be killing Dumbledore (figuratively). Harry stood up and raised his glass of juice.

“Well I’ve been outed folks, here’s to the Great Lakes Magical Institute!” Glasses were raised all over the room. The faculty, sitting at two tables in the corner, looked very pleased. Claudia spoke for the table:

“Well there’s no going back Harry, you’re stuck here with us.”

“There was no going back the minute I drew my wand in anger on Albus Dumbledore, the rest of this has just been window dressing. I’ve made some great new friends, and the next two years are going to be the best of my life, I know this for sure.” He sat back with a large grin on his face, as Sophie took his hand and squeezed it.

Harry would spend the next week reading multiple history books, both wizard and muggle, as he familiarized himself with his new subjects. He flew every day, and soon got his flying rhythm back. He even played some soccer with Warrick and a few others on the athletic field, though Warrick mocked him for days afterward as the only English kid alive who couldn’t play a decent game of soccer. Harry shot back that it was unfortunate that Warrick kept getting slaughtered at poker by an excitable house elf. The two of them got along so well that they started plotting to somehow rig Harry’s sorting so that he would wind up in Cortez., which according to Warrick, was the weakest House in Defense anyway.

During this time there was no contact from Dumbledore of any kind, and Bill and Remus both told him that Dumbledore wasn’t even

bringing him up at Order meetings. Snape had so far abided by the terms of his house arrest, though Dumbledore was mum on that subject as well. Harry was looking forward to the day that he didn't have to think about Dumbledore at all, but had great difficulty accepting that the old man had surrendered. The Howlers started coming in two days after the article in The Chronicle, as The Daily Prophet had jumped on the news of Harry's move. In an owl from Peter, Harry learned that the reaction to it was split about 50/50, with the half on his side saying that Harry had a right to do whatever he wanted, the other half agreeing as long as what Harry wanted was in Great Britain and Hogwarts.

On Friday Harry sent Dobby with a message to the twins, asking them to set up a meeting with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna for the next night.....but only to have the first three show up at the shop not knowing what was going on, and at the last minute. It was left unsaid that they should be checked for any surveillance charms, but the twins had surely learned a lesson from the last time.

Saturday, August 17, 1996

9 pm (London time, 3 pm Michigan time)

Harry flooed through to the twins' trunk, and climbed out the trapdoor to find himself in what looked like their laboratory. He gingerly made his way through the room, trying desperately not to touch anything for fear it would explode on him. This was only the third time he had been in the shop actually. The first time had been right after he'd gotten his passport and visa (just to see the place, and get some samples), the second the day after when he had to flee from Dumbledore. He left the lab and walked over to the door of the twins' living room, where he saw them:

"Hello guys." He must have been quieter than he thought, because all five of them jerked up in surprise. Luna and Neville smiled at him and walked over to greet him. The other three looked ambiguous though.

"Where are Fred and George?"

“Right behind you mate.” Harry almost jumped out of his skin, he turned to see the must-have-been Disillusioned twins.

“Gee thanks guys, first I somehow survive an international portkey, then you two try to give me heart failure.” Fred’s wink was very subtle, and not seen by his siblings or Hermione.

“All part of the service there partner.” He took Harry aside and whispered: “They’re clean Harry, no charms of any kind on them. I guess all three tried to rip the old man a new one at an Order meeting, so he’s backed off.”

“Thanks mates, I appreciate it.”

“Go easy on them Harry, they really have been caught in the middle, with both you and Dumbledore questioning their loyalty, it hasn’t been easy on them.”

“I will, don’t worry so much guys.” They both cuffed him on the back of the head, and Harry went back into the room. He walked up to Hermione and gave her a hug, and one to Ginny.

“Sorry, no hug for you Ron, I wouldn’t want Hermione to get jealous.” Ron managed a smile at hearing that, and settled for a handshake. Harry could sense the awkwardness emanating from the three of them, so he started off with a softball:

“So Ginny, congratulations on making Prefect, your Mum must have gone through the roof.”

“She did, it was the happiest I’ve seen her since we got back. How have you been?”

“I’m really good actually, I like my new school. How did the old man react to the news?”

“He wasn’t as surprised as you might think, Bill had let him know that you were leaving the country.”

"I know, I told him to tell Dumbledore. I figured if he had a little information he might not try anything."

"It must have worked. Why all the way in Michigan? Why there?"

"Because my Headmistress and Dumbledore aren't too friendly. From what I gather he's pretty chummy with the ones in Toronto and Salem, and Great Lakes is a very good school." Little time as she had had to prepare for this, Hermione had some questions she'd been wanting to ask for weeks now, and took over the pseudo-interrogation from Ginny.

"Was it really that bad for you at Hogwarts Harry? Is there something we should have seen, but didn't?"

"Yes, it was that bad Hermione.....and I don't know if you lot could have seen it, since you were in it. Look at the people in this room now (the twins were outside), we were the only friends we all had, except for Dean and Seamus kind of.....well not kind of for you Ginny of course (she smiled). Ron, Hermione, I think you were tarred with my brush. Other students just assumed you were trouble because the trouble always happened around me. It's like the three of us couldn't dare get mad at each other, because the others wouldn't have anywhere else to turn. You may still see some of the residue from that, but I think you'll make a lot of new friends this year." Ron seemed to perk up a little at hearing that.

"How long ago did you start thinking about leaving?"

"The day I got back to Privet Drive.....last year. I thought about it off and on all year, and decided for sure when Dumbledore put me back with those people again this year. I guess it wasn't prominent enough in my thoughts for Snape to pull it out during our lessons, or maybe he did and wanted me to leave." That was certainly plausible enough, Harry leaving Hogwarts would have put a dance in Snape's step to be sure.

"Is there nothing we can do to get you to change your mind?" Harry started laughing when he heard that, it was so sweet, yet so obtuse

at the same time. He reached out and squeezed her hand for a brief moment.

“Hermione, it’s done. The moment I set foot in that school, I was committed, and nothing whatsoever has happened to make me change my mind about it. I’ve made some pretty cool friends so far, with more to come I’m sure as their friends come back for Fall term. I’m happy guys, I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life. Would you deny me that?”

“And we don’t count? You would abandon us?”

“Ron.....it’s like I told your brother last month: I would risk my life to save yours in a second, but I won’t risk it just to make you happy. The only reason I can possibly think of to stay at Hogwarts is you five, and that just doesn’t outweigh all the bad.” Harry had decided that in telling his story to them, he would use Bill as his substitute for Peter, given that Bill had taken pains to give the Order that impression. Ron looked embarrassed at Harry’s salvo, and flushed a little.

“I guess I don’t blame you for leaving really, but what about You Know Who?”

“What about him?” That response even left Neville and Luna looking a bit taken aback.

“What if he goes on the offensive?”

“Well leaving aside that I don’t much care what he does, what could I do about it even if I did?” This was one of the rare times in life that Ron got to explain what he thought was the obvious.

“We heard the Prophecy, you’re supposed to be the one who stops him.”

“Says Trelawney, and even on the off chance that she’s right, I’m kind of ill-prepared to fight him right now aren’t I? Gee, I wonder whose fault that is? I will not become a martyr for a cause I don’t believe in, for a leader that I don’t believe in.”

“Do you hate Dumbledore that much?”

“Yes Ron, I do. I’ll never forgive him for my childhood, and there’s nothing he can do to make up for it. If I ever catch him alone he will be attacked, though I’ll fall short of handing him over to Voldemort.”

“And doing this will help you recover what’s left of your childhood?”

“I really wish you would get it out of your head that you can talk me out of this Hermione. I don’t know whether it will ultimately work out for me in the States, but so far so good. As to the war.....let’s add it up: you five, the twins, Molly and Arthur, Remus and Tonks, and a couple of other people that shall remain nameless.....those are the people in magical Britain that I care about, and who care about me. The rest of them can be Voldemort’s sport for all I care, let them take care of themselves. You guys I know can take care of yourselves.”

“That’s very cold Harry, it’s not like you.”

“It’s the truth Hermione, no more and no less. I’ve already gotten twenty-seven Howlers in the last week alone. Oh I haven’t heard them of course, the school disposes them in cases like this, but I know what they must have said: ‘You’re a coward Potter.’ ‘You’re running from You Know Who!’ ‘Dumbledore knows best.’ All because I decided I wanted a change, and they in their infinite wisdom think I should follow orders. The hell with them. I want my chance at happiness, I want my chance at having a normal teenage life.....normal for a wizard anyway. I saw my ticket out and I took it. Now I want all of you to look me in the eye right now and tell me that you wouldn’t have done the same!” The vehemence of Harry’s last sentence surprised all but Neville (nothing about Harry surprised him anymore after listening to him threaten the Dursleys). Ginny spoke first.

“Yeah Harry, I guess in your position I might have done the same.....but I would have picked Australia.” Harry managed a smile at hearing that. Ron was next:

“I don’t know what I would have done, but I won’t try to talk you out of it anymore.”

“Same for me Harry, it won’t be the same without you at Hogwarts.”

“No, it’ll be much quieter for all of you, and that’s a good thing.” Now that everyone seemed to have accepted the inevitable, though Neville and Luna were noticeably and suspiciously silent on the topic, Ron had a question to ask.

“Since you’re not really coming back, can I have The Marauders Map?” Hermione looked at him in exasperation:

“Ron!”

“Well he won’t need it, and it’s dead useful and you know it.”

“Good grief Ron.”

“Well he does have a point Hermione, I won’t need it, but I’m not ready to part with it just yet.”

“Why not?”

“I’m going to try to make a similar one for Great Lakes, Remus will be coming by later on with some instructions for me.”

“Are the Marauders going to ride again?”

“Could be, could be. I want to get a better lay of the land there first.” Ginny broke in hesitantly:

“Now technically this doesn’t involve trying to talk you back here, but Mum will want to know that you’re coming back for Christmas at least.” Oh why oh why did she have to bring that up Harry thought.

“That’s four months away Ginny, I don’t know what I’ll be doing yet. A lot of my friends over there stay at school year round, so I might stay there to be with them, they don’t have families to go back to.”

“They’re orphans, like you?”

“Not technically Luna, their families won’t have them back because they’re magical, and the families aren’t.” Ah, they all thought. They could see how Harry would relate to that, and have sympathy for it.

“We can all understand that, but remember The Burrow is always open to you.”

“I know Ginny, and I can promise that I’ll come visit next summer at least. Right now though, I want to keep both of my feet in America. Guys, this will be my last visit to Britain until summer, unless something really horrible happens here.”

“What about the Death Eater trial?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that, I’ll be back for that too. Fudge and I talked about it during our meeting.”

Harry was then prevailed upon to share what went on during his Fudge meeting, although he left out the Peter and Percy details. He figured that Dumbledore didn’t need to know that his spy’s cover had been blown. As was his new rule, he told them nothing that he didn’t mind the old man knowing. The twins joined them soon after, and the seven of them swapped stories and remembrances for the next two hours. The twins told a lot of previously unheard stories about their first two years at Hogwarts, and a lot of things about their reputation were cleared up somewhat. Harry told them a few details about his new school, but he changed the subject whenever his new friends were brought up, he didn’t want them to do any comparing.....and he definitely wasn’t going to tell them anything about Sophie, though that wasn’t going to work both ways, she would get a complete report later.

Remus joined them after awhile, and Harry excused himself and the twins so that they could talk Marauders Map.

“You got my note, good. Can it be done?”

“Yes, but you’ll have to do it, unless you want me to sneak in.” Oh no, Harry didn’t want the wards set off at school because of him.

“No, I don’t think that would be wise. What will I have to do?”

“What you have to do is somehow get into every room in the place and cast a certain spell, which will activate that part of your map. How far along is your blueprint?”

“Good question, I would say about 2/3 or so, though I haven’t been in much more than a couple of classroom, common rooms, and the dining hall. Dobby and Winky are handling that. They assure me that the whole thing will be done in a couple of weeks. I’ve made a point of not wandering around on my own, I’m trying to make a good impression on the teachers that are there.”

“Well that’s a smart idea, but those two can’t do the spell work. You’ll have to do that yourself, or draft some help. You need to charm the parchment first, then use the spell I’m going to give you in every room you have on there. Once you get each room done, it will appear on the Map, and you’ll be able to pick up the magical energy of each person within it.....that’s how the names appear on the Map. Remember, even if you don’t get all the rooms right away, a partial Map will still be useful to you.” He handed over a piece of parchment with some instructions on it, and Harry pocketed it.

“Yes it will, thanks Remus. How long did it take you four to make the first one?”

“It took the four of us about three months, and a lot of detentions to get into certain offices. Speaking of which, what are you going to do with the Hogwarts’ version?” Harry checked to see that Ron and company weren’t within earshot.

“I’m giving it to Neville, Ron would run amok with it, and I think he’d do something dumb and get it confiscated.”

“Like you once did.....oh yeah, it was twice wasn’t it?”

“I was young and foolish Remus, but I learn from my mistakes, Ron has trouble with that. Plus, Ron has taken a few too many shots at me over the last couple of hours about what I’m doing, and I’m not going to reward him for it.” Remus looked over at the twins, who seemed to be in agreement with this.

“You could give it to Ginny or Hermione.”

“Nah, Hermione wouldn’t do anything useful with it, and I don’t know about Ginny.....I just feel better about the idea of giving it to Neville. He has a lot of potential in him, and if I can help just a little bit.....”

“Speaking of Ginny, you know Mum’s always hoped that you and she would.....”

“No thanks Fred, but I’m just too close to you and your family to risk it all by trying to date Ginny. I don’t want you lot coming at me with drawn wands if it doesn’t work out.”

“We would never.....okay, yeah we would, you’re right.”

“Besides, despite having known your sister for four years I barely know her. I’m not risking your wrath for a long distance relationship with a girl I hardly know. Anyway, c’mon, they sound like their getting restless back in there.” Harry led the other three back into the room, to be met with curious stares.

“Guys, I need to get going, dinner starts in half an hour and it would look strange if I didn’t show. I’ll send Hedwig over every couple of weeks or so, we can keep in touch that way.” The last thing he wanted them to know about was the trunk. Leaving aside that it might get out to Dumbledore, he didn’t want them pressuring him to visit all the time through it. This whole session had made him quite uncomfortable, and while he still loved them all, the guilt trips being laid were starting bug him. They all said their goodbyes, and he was able to dodge Hermione’s request to see his portkey by showing her an American quarter that he had in his pocket. He quickly walked back to the lab and did his floo business, emerging in his own still unfurnished trunk. He left the Map instructions inside the top layer of the trunk and was just about to leave for dinner when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in!”

It was Sophie, coming to get him for dinner. She was the only one he had told about where he was going (though not yet how he got there).

“How did it go?”

“It was fine I guess, a bit strange really, but fine.”

“Strange? How?”

“I don’t know, I can’t quite put my finger on it. When I figure it out you’ll be the first to know.” She smiled and grabbed his hand.

“Sounds like a plan, c’mon, it’s dinner time.”

“Cool, I’m starving. When it’s over though, let’s the five of us come back in here, I have a plan that I’m going to need your help on.”

“What kind of plan?”

“The sneaky kind, you’ll love it. It involves some mapmaking.”

End chapter

Author Notes: The chapter title means nothing to the story, it's just my favorite line from Goblet (the book). This story is in no way HBP compliant (how could it be, being also a sixth year story), but I am going to feel free to appropriate some characters from it, though not in the way that canon does. It's the same way I've done with taking from Straw, just a few characters and situations from there. All locations will be at Great Lakes unless I specify otherwise. Oh yeah, one last thing. I'm trying some Latin for a couple of spells in this chapter. I'm using a Latin translator I found online, but the conjugation is probably off, any Latin buffs will forgive me I hope.

Saturday, August 17 (cont.)

"Mapmaking?"

"I'll show you when we're all in here, and it should be in here, we don't want any prying eyes." Harry had seen this look on people before.

"Uh oh, I don't have a good feeling about this."

"Oh it's nothing heinous Sophie, I promise you, just some harmless fun."

"If you say so." She looked a little dubious, but squeezed his hand tighter. They walked down to the fourth floor and gathered up the others. After dinner, Harry led them all back up to his room. A room which all of them had seen at some point over the last weeks, but they had never hung out there, preferring the creature comforts of Cortez Lounge to Harry's bare shell of a room. There were three chairs, now occupied by Claudia, Sophie, and Harry, who crowded them around the bed that the other two were sitting on. Harry walked over to his trunk and took out the Map.

"I would like you all to see something. It's called The Marauder's Map." He unrolled it, said that he solemnly swore that he was up to no good, and showed it to them. Remus had assured him that it worked no matter how far from Hogwarts it was, and he was proven right. The other four looked at the Map with some fascination, Claudia had the first reaction.

"Is thing a game or something? I see your buddy Dumbledore on here, moving around.....wait a sec."

"You got it, this is a map of Hogwarts and everybody in it, in real time. Dumbledore never seems to sleep, he's the only one moving, in his office." The other Hogwarts teachers were snug in their beds, and all of them seemed to be there except for the new Potions guy and Remus (who of course had his own house now). Harry started pointing out people, they had heard about all his teachers by now.

"That's McGonagall, there's McDowell, she replaced my mum teaching Runes.....Flitwick is really cool, I'll miss him the most of the teachers. The Map is kind of hard to read when all of the students are there, but I managed to learn." Reiko was the most fascinated by it.

"Where did you get this? Who made it?"

"I got it from the twins a few years ago, they 'found' it in the Caretaker's office."

"That Filch guy you told us about?"

"Right in one Claudia, apparently he didn't know what it was. You need a wand to use it, and he didn't have one. My dad and his three best friends made it, back in their schooldays at Hogwarts. I don't know how it got confiscated, and if he does, Remus isn't telling. Given that there is coverage of the girls' rooms, my mum must have helped too."

"This is so cool, I wish we had one of those for this place." Harry looked at Warrick and smiled.

"Funny you should mention that Warrick. Winky!" She popped in.

"Yes Harry?"

"Let's see the blueprint you've been working on." She went into the closet and retrieved it. Harry spread it out on the bed between

Warrick and Reiko. The first three floors were mostly filled in, with the remaining work to be done with the student floors. Winky decided to stick around, in case they had any further instructions for her.

“So you want your own Map for this school?”

“It would be convenient Claudia, a lot of work upfront, but convenient.”

“I take it Remus gave you the instructions on how to do this?”

“He did, just now. I spent the last few hours in London.” The others just assumed it was a portkey and didn’t even ask how he got there.

“Well he is a Lycan, he obviously can’t come here.”

“So I’ve been told, and I also went there to talk about things to my friends. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny didn’t get much of an explanation when I left, and I thought they deserved one face to face.”

“How hard did they try to talk you out of it?”

“Pretty hard, but only Hermione really thought she could actually succeed. The other two were just going through the motions I think. I talked with Remus right before I came back, and he gave me the instructions.”

“And you think we can make this Map?”

“I’m sure as anything not going to try by myself, and I think we can make a nice shell of one.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean for the time being, we don’t have a good way of getting in the rooms of the other students, so it’ll be hard to put them on the Map. You have to cast a spell in each room in order to do it.”

“For the time being?”

“The twins are working on something, trying to attach spells to solid objects on a time-delay. They got the idea from muggle grenades I think, though I’m not sure I want to know. They think it would be great for pranks, since you wouldn’t have to have your wand out at the scene.” There was some silence as they worked this over in their minds. Reiko was still looking over the Hogwarts Map.

“I’m with you Harry, I think we should have one of these, at least one. This would be fun if we used it right.”

“My girl is right of course, I’m in.” Claudia had a question though.

“How much mayhem are you planning Harry? Are you going to use this to sneak off campus?”

“I have no need to sneak off campus Claudia, neither am I interested in harmful fun, just the harmless kind.”

“Okay, based on that, I’ll do my part in getting it going. Who’ll keep it once it’s done?” Harry had thought of this, he figured it should either be him (since it was his idea), or Claudia (who was the leader of the group), until he thought of a third option.

“I’m thinking that Dobby and Winky can be the custodians of it. When someone wants the Map, they just call out to one of them, and they’ll bring it. Is that good for you Winky?”

“Oh yes Harry, that is fine with Dobby and me.” Claudia saw the same compromise.

“It works for me, and I feel confident in speaking for Jonas. I got an owl from him today by the way, he’s looking forward to meeting you Harry. Sophie, are you with us?”

“Of course, it seems like fun.”

“Good, I was hoping you’d all be with me on this.”

“What’s the plan Harry?”

“Good question Claudia. Look at the blueprint for the basement and floors one through three, what have Dobby and Winky missed?” Reiko picked up the blueprint and peered closely at it.

“It looks good as far as I can tell, there are even a couple of rooms that I didn’t know about. What do you think Warrick?”

“I agree, I didn’t know about that room in the basement corner there. Winky, what’s in there?”

“It’s a meeting room Mr. Warrick, I went in there at night last week. It has a round table and lots of chairs.” Sophie looked at Claudia.

“Is that the staff meeting room then? I always thought that it was on the third floor with the offices.”

“So did I, or maybe the room is for a purpose we don’t know about. What else was in there Winky?”

“Nothing else, except for a television and a video player, like in the Lounges.”

“Well it’s good that you got into it, but it can’t be anything too important.”

“Remus says that we need the blueprint to be complete before we start doing the spells. Winky, how much longer do you think you’ll need?”

“Another week maybe Harry, it takes longer because Dobby cannot draw.” Indeed the blueprint was better than the original Map, and Harry had seen Dobby’s drawing skills (they left much to be desired). Dobby usually just operated as the lookout.

“That’s fine Winky, you’ve done a great job with this. We can start doing the work next weekend. Will Jonas be back by then?”

“No, he’s coming back with the rest of them, two weeks from today.”

“We can wait until then, we’ll come up with a plan that involves all six of us. Start thinking of nicknames for yourselves though, so we can put them on the new Map.” Sophie looked at the Hogwarts Map.

“Which one of them was your dad? Mooney must be Remus.”

“Dad was Prongs, and that will be my name as well. I have James as my middle name, I want this too. Padfoot was my godfather Sirius, and Wormtail was the traitor.” His voice didn’t change as he said that last part, but his face did harden a little bit. That was one sore point that was always going to fester. Reiko had a question for him, as they left the room to go hang out in the Cortez Lounge.

“Tell us more about these spell grenade things.”

“It’s something they’re playing with, but haven’t gotten right yet. What happens is, you take a rubber ball, put the spell on it, and throw it or roll it to the target.”

“That sounds great, what’s the problem?”

“They’re still trying to find a way to delay the spell. Right now it goes off less than a second after they put it on the ball. Add to that, they want to figure out a way to charm the balls to disappear once the spell has gone off, so people don’t know how it happened.”

“So we would just roll these balls into various dorm rooms, and that’s how we’d get them on the Map?”

“Kind of. I was thinking more along the lines of Dobby and Winky taking them from us, popping into the rooms when no one is in there, dropping the ball (so to speak), and then getting out. That’s the plan so far at least, it’s just a matter of them getting it to work. The twins tell me that it’s a priority for them, but not their top priority. They won’t say much about that one, other than it will be their biggest seller.”

“Aren’t you their partner? You should make them tell you.”

“I’m partner in name only Reiko, I just financed the startup. Plus, I put all my profit back in the shop, though that was my idea not theirs.

Besides, anyone who knows the twins knows that you don't 'tell' them anything. I'll get them over here sometime, you guys will love them." Fred and George were his mental exceptions to his 'no blending of British friends and American friends' policy.

"Are they going to get up some kind of catalog?"

"Yeah, from what they tell me. Otherwise the shop would be pretty boring during the Fall term. Originally they were just going to do it for Hogwarts students, but with my new situation things have expanded. I have a quick post setup with them, so getting things here shouldn't take a long time."

"You must have a stock of portkeys then."

"Something like that." They talked of more mundane things the rest of the night, though the idea of the Map stayed in everyone's minds.

Monday, August 19, 1996

Hogwarts Formal Conference Room

Noon

The meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors took place at its regularly scheduled time, with quite a few unexpected guests. The entire Hogwarts faculty was present, including the new hires for Defense (one Remus Lupin), and Potions (a young man named Charles Shepherd). The invitations had been sent to the non-Dumbledore/McGonagall faculty at the last minute, and the recipients were told that their jobs depended on their attendance. Even Trelawney and Firenze were there, the first time either of them had ever been in this room. Fudge was not present, but Percy was there on his behalf. He studiously made a point of not acknowledging Dumbledore, his true loyalties still being a secret.

Board Chairperson Susan Derkins waited for the clock to strike noon, and proceeded to call the meeting to order.

“Let us begin, as we have a number of issues to get through. I see that all the Board members are present, as are the Hogwarts professors. Let us get the small topics out of the way before we deal with the main issue.

The small topics took about 30 minutes to dispense with, and included: dates of the two Hogsmeade visits during Fall Term, a Yule Ball to be held this year, a few new security measures, and the hires of Charles Shepherd and Remus Lupin. Both of them went relatively smoothly, as Shepherd’s family was very pure-blood and respected (his parents owned Witch Weekly), and the Board reluctantly acknowledged that Remus had been very popular with the students, and would get the Defense classes back on track. The Board, in something of a surprise, had gone along with everything that Dumbledore had wanted, from the dates to the hires. The Hogwarts faculty didn’t wonder what they were doing there though (well, maybe Trelawney), they knew their part in the play was coming up now.

“Now Albus, the last order of business is also the most important: Why Harry Potter is no longer a student at Hogwarts, and why the media in both Great Britain and The United States are both blaming you for his leaving.”

Dumbledore had known this was coming, but he was at a loss of what to do about it. He had read the article in The Chronicle very carefully (Harry had very helpfully sent him a copy), and hadn’t found anything that wasn’t true in it.....at least the truth as Harry believed it anyway.

“Harry apparently believes that he is in danger if he remains at Hogwarts, so he took the opportunity to leave.” The ensuing questions came from everybody:

“I was under the impression that you were having him watched?”

“I was, but the watching only kept others out, not him in. I took it for granted that his summer pattern would be the same as in previous years. That was my mistake.”

“You said that he apparently believes that he’s in danger, what has he told you?”

"Harry is not willing to speak with me at the moment, I have not talked with him since the night Professor Snape was arrested."

"Arrested after he attacked Potter, is that not correct?"

"Yes it is, though my belief is that Harry goaded him into doing so."

"You must be joking Dumbledore, you saw that pensieve memory the same as we did. You must be the only one in the room who thinks that Potter was at fault for the assault."

"I did not say it was solely his fault, or even mostly, but he contributed to it."

"And one wonders why Potter left, it is now becoming much more clear to me at least."

"Do you deny any of the reasons for his departure, as stated in the American newspaper?"

"They are all true in a sense, but not in detail. I will certainly admit that he blames me for many of his troubles here, and he has the right on a few of them."

"And you don't agree?"

"Mistakes were made in his upbringing. I never should have allowed him to return to his muggle relatives the last two summers at the very least, and I probably should have removed him much earlier than that. Unfortunately fifteen years ago my options were limited as to where to place him."

"Two summers in a row that he witnessed the death of someone he was close to, right?"

"Yes, that is true, and as I said, I should have handled it differently."

"Are there any other students for which you are acting as an illegal guardian?"

“What I did was not technically illegal, at least not by placing him with his muggle relatives. They had every opportunity to file an official complaint, and Petunia Evans Dursley knew that she could. She accepted her burden of responsibility for Harry.”

“A responsibility to mistreat him his whole life, we’ve all heard the rumors Albus, it turns out that they were under-exaggerated.” Dumbledore couldn’t deny this, and looked for a long moment over at Remus.

“It was pointed out to me by Professor Lupin recently that I was concentrating so hard on saving his life that I didn’t stop to think about his soul.....and I am compelled to agree with that. And to answer your other question, I have no other students watched aside from Ron and Ginny Weasley, and Hermione Granger. Their parents are all fully on board with that, and would be happy to tell you so themselves if you wish.”

This was not going at all the way some Board members thought it would. Dumbledore was agreeing with them much more than they had anticipated, and a lot of prepared diatribes weren’t seeing the light of day because of this. Seeing that the wind had been taken out of their sails, he delivered his closing statement in hopes of ending this before it really began.

“Members of the Board, I do not know what else I can tell you. I acknowledge that Professor Snape was probably the most unpopular teacher in my long tenure at Hogwarts, but he is gone now. I agree that I should never have left him unsupervised with Harry Potter, but that’s over with.....and Harry came out of it much better than Professor Snape did. All of that said, Voldemort is still loose, and he must be our number one priority. Harry’s absence does not change that, not fundamentally anyway. Our new hires will increase the quality of our teaching, and the year should be much more peaceful. As the world now knows, Headmistress Murray and I are not the best of friends, she was always a little too much a believer that ‘America does best’ to suit me.....but she is capable and intelligent. Harry will not suffer under her guidance.”

“Will you be doing anything to bring him back?”

“I am hoping that with our added security measures, and the new faculty, that this year will be peaceful enough here that he will be coming back on his own. Until that time, I am resigned to the fact that Harry will not be with us this school year. I will not beg him to come back, nor do I think he would respond to it any better than my other entreaties.” The teachers, seeing how deftly the old man was handling the Board, began looking at the clock and wondering what they were doing there. The meeting broke up a few minutes later, and Dumbledore motioned for the teachers to stay around. After some murmured congratulations on how he apparently still had ‘it’, Dumbledore started the impromptu faculty meeting.

“Remus, are you still thinking we should place a few teachers on the train?” With Harry’s situation settled, the two of them had by and large patched up their differences, and were getting along much better.

“I am Headmaster, it’s no risk and potentially a great reward. The train might be a prime target for Voldemort if he is ready to begin attacking again.” Flitwick leaned forward in his chair.

“I agree with Remus, there is no harm in making sure. The key question here is whether the Death Eaters consider Hogwarts a target with Harry now gone. It’s entirely possible that they will leave us alone. I would think that they would do everything possible to keep Harry overseas, and harming one of his friends might bring him back with a vengeance.” This gave voice to the private sentiments of more than a few of the faculty: They might all be better off if Harry stayed abroad for the next two years.

“What kind of Auror support can we expect?”

“The Minister has promised us five Aurors on the train, with another five each at Kings Cross and Hogsmeade Stations.” Remus thought that this should be enough, but he still wanted the teachers on board.

“I’ll take one of the spots on the train, we should have one more. That will make seven adult wizards on there, any more would likely frighten

the younger students. Harry's friends and other members of the DA will be our auxiliary if the train is hit, I'll speak to Hermione about it." Shepherd, the new Potions guy, lifted his hand slightly to get everyone's attention.

"I'll go as the second person, being the new man and all. It will give the kids a chance to get used to me a little more." The other teachers nodded their agreement, it would leave the three most powerful teachers back at school (Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Flitwick), just in case an end around move was made by their enemies. Soon the room just held the Order members (all four of them). Remus voiced something he'd been thinking about for a few days now.

"Albus, I think I'm going to go visit Harry for a few days before school starts. There are some things I want to talk about with him, and I want him to know that his bridges aren't burnt here." McGonagall didn't look too pleased with this.

"I wouldn't say that his bridges are intact Remus, those were some serious charges laid by him in that article. The reputations of both Professor Dumbledore and Hogwarts have received some damage. I think an apology is in order if he were to come back."

"Says the woman who stood by while he was put in danger the last five years, and did nothing.....well, did nothing other than parrot the Headmaster. You know, I can almost see his hand behind you, like some muggle puppeteer." McGonagall's eyes flashed and her wand was out in an instant, but so was Remus'.

"Be very careful Remus, you yourself are here on sufferance." This, however, did not work on the new Remus.....the rich guy.

"Whatever am I to do, with my million galleons and all." Flitwick very quietly left his seat:

Accio wand! Accio wand!

"Enough of this, both of you. This is just what Voldemort wants and needs, us fighting it out amongst ourselves." Flitwick had always taken Dumbledore's side on things, but treated his friend's musings

about Harry's safety with two grains of salt, not one. He partially agreed with Remus though, in that he didn't believe that Minerva ever looked at salt when thinking about Dumbledore.

"Filius is right, both of you are to stand down. Minerva, nothing Harry has said, or not said, is irreparable. Remus, Harry does not need someone to defend his every thought and action when someone is critical of him. Also, you cannot go to Great Lakes anytime you wish, without permission from them. They have anti-werewolf wards all over the school, and I doubt they would be willing to mute them for one person." Remus hadn't known about the wards, Harry had not mentioned them in the two letters he had gotten from him.....letters that indeed did not include an invitation to visit, but still.

"I did not know that. I was aware that there is a werewolf problem in America, but not that it was so bad as that. Minerva, I apologize for drawing my wand on you." Abruptly, he got up from his chair, collected his wand, and left the room, without waiting to see if a return apology was forthcoming (it would not have been).

"Minerva, apologize to him later, if you will."

"If you insist (Dumbledore nodded that he did). I still don't like what Potter did, even if the news was going to come out eventually."

"In broad strokes it was the truth, and I imagine that he didn't want it to seem as if he had fled. Harry has refused all requests to be interviewed, so he isn't rubbing our noses in it. I suppose we should be grateful for that courtesy." McGonagall excused herself to get some lunch, and to find Remus to clear the air.

"Shouldn't someone check up on him though? I thought Remus had a point there."

"No Filius, best to let him be. I think Hogwarts, on the whole, will be safer with him gone. He is too much a lightning rod for our enemies. They have an excellent Defense program there, and it may just be better for him to train without the distractions offered here."

"I must admit that I'm surprised at your position. I half expected a kidnap attempt via portkey." Dumbledore chuckled.

"No Filius, I've learned my lesson. Harry will have no cause to be angry at me anytime soon. When the time comes, he will be ready, and he will come back." Flitwick had seen this look of satisfaction before, and felt he owed it to his friend to play devil's advocate.

"You've been wrong about that boy time and time again over the last few months, why are you so sure you're right this time?"

"I'm right this time because Voldemort won't be able to help himself Filius, he'll lure Harry back here and force the final confrontation. That's why I don't need to beg him to come back, Voldemort will do the work for me." The Headmaster exited the room, leaving his Charms teacher with a thoughtful look on his face.

Wednesday, August 21, 1996

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

8:00 pm

The inner core of the Death Eaters had gathered to hear their Lord, the first public meeting with him since the Snape incident. Voldemort had not exactly been in hiding, but he thought a personal touch would be better in some of his recruiting. Pettigrew was functioning as his secretary of sorts, and gave out Voldemort's instructions. Those taking part in the meeting included: Pettigrew, Goyle Sr. (who had not been in on the DOM fiasco), Narcissa and Draco Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, Magdalena Edgecombe (mother of Marietta), and Royal Gibbon, another male Death Eater who had not been at the DOM. Not present were the imprisoned Death Eaters, nor Snape, still under house arrest.

Voldemort swept into the room and everyone immediately went quiet. Without preamble, he began things.

"Magdalena, what is your report from the Board meeting?"

“Potter really has fled my Lord, it was not a ruse by Dumbledore.” When the bad man had first heard the news he had started laughing, more at the transparency of it all than anything. The idea that Potter would just pick up stakes was an absurd one, or so he had thought at the time. The newspaper accounts had begun to change his mind somewhat, but he didn’t think that Dumbledore was above planting a few press releases in order to try to confuse him.

“What makes you think so?”

“First, I don’t think he would go to so much trouble in front of the Board, who he knows doesn’t much care for him. Second, Dumbledore would not have taken the abuse he did from them, just for a silly plot. He’s gone Master, and the old fool claims that he won’t be trying to bring him back.”

“And you believe that?”

“I don’t know sir, but I think we would have heard about anything serious.”

“Yes, you’re probably right in that. Draco, when school begins I want you to begin surveillance on the Weasleys and Granger, find out what you can about how serious this is. See if they are still in contact with Potter or not, how often, and with how much friendliness.”

“Yes Master.”

“Do not terrorize them though, or Longbottom. Leave them alone whenever possible.” Draco had rarely looked so taken aback.

“Sir?”

“You heard me, give them no reason to go crying to Potter about what’s going on. That goes for the rest of you as well. No targeting of the Weasleys, any of them.....unless they are wandless and defenseless, then kill them quickly.” Bella was the only one with the courage to speak, though all seemed to want to say something.

“You want Potter to stay in America my Lord?”

“Better there than at Hogwarts, for the time being anyway. Wormtail, reach out to our contacts in America, see what kind of watch we can put on Potter.”

“Yes Master, I will send owls to them today. Do you wish to involve the vampires and the werewolves as well? They are very strong in America.” Voldemort pondered a moment.

“Contact the vampires only, not the werewolves. I am still in negotiations with Fenrir Greyback, I want things concluded with him before I do anything with any werewolf. Send a muggle mail message to Mark Frankel, he’s a vampire clan leader in Chicago, the exact address is in our files. Explain to him the situation, and find out about this school that Potter is attending.”

“Yes, Master, it will be done.”

“Good, the rest of you continue recruiting. We need numbers if we are to raid the Ministry in force, which we will. Our next big attack will be right during Lucius’ trial.”

“A direct attack or indirect my Lord?” He was still working out the details in his own mind, so he didn’t give her a straight answer.

“Both Bella, if we have the numbers. Gibbon, I want you to make up a detachment of soldiers and keep a constant watch on Grimmauld Place. Make notes of who goes in and out, and see if there are any weaknesses.”

“Yes sir. If I may ask this sir, if we have a chance to assault it directly, may we do so?”

“You may, as long as you do not harm any Weasleys, or Lupin for that matter.”

“Yes sir, your orders are perfectly clear.” Voldemort nodded to him that he was dismissed, and Gibbon quickly left the room.

“Goyle, I want you to do some recon work in Flackter Alley in Milwaukee. Get a lay of the land, see if there is any Potter gossip. Do not speak unless you absolutely have to, your accent is strong enough that it is a dead giveaway, and it will get back to Potter (as it happened, Goyle was also from Surrey). Practice speaking American while you’re over there. Stay in a muggle hotel room and watch their television. This may turn into a long-term assignment, so acclimate yourself there.”

“When shall I leave sir?”

“Leave Sunday, Potter will have gotten his school supplies by then, so no risk of him spotting you. I will arrange for portkeys for you to get there.....no, scratch that, take muggle air transport, it will help you with your accent. Narcissa, make sure he has the money he needs to do this.”

“Yes my Lord.”

“Do not go to the school Goyle, not without permission. The rest of you are dismissed, except for Wormtail and Bella.” They filed out of the room, except for his two ‘confidants’.

“Bella, make sure your arrogant nephew understands about Weasley and Granger. Until I decide what is the best course of action for Potter, I don’t want him having a reason to come back here. Plus, I want to see the dynamic at Hogwarts now that he’s gone. See who are now the leaders there now since Potter has left them behind.” Wormtail had an opinion on that.

“It won’t be Weasley and Granger. Weasley is too limited an intellect to be dangerous to us, and Granger insists on showing hers off too much.” If anyone in their camp knew those two, it was Wormtail, and Voldemort took his point.

“That might be one reason he left, when I was visiting his mind, I saw that he was becoming tired of them.”

“Have you tried to access his mind lately Master?”

"I did last week Bella, but the brat has learned Occlumency sufficiently enough to keep me out. That road is now closed to us it seems, but I didn't sense that he had detected my presence."

"Have you decided what to do about Snape yet Master?"

"He's fine where he is now. He knows his true loyalties, and so do we. Peter, did you set up the portkey drop so that he can send us the potions he's working on?"

"I did Master, and the received sign was there."

"Ah the Ministry, not thinking that house elves can do some dirty work for us. Naïve, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

"May I ask Master, what did Greyback want in return for his assistance?" Voldemort smiled at her, and Bella knew this wouldn't be good.

"He wants Gryffindor House." Huh? The looks of confusion on them were very amusing, so he waited a bit before elaborating.

"He wants to have a little conversion ceremony with the members of Gryffindor House, to make them werewolves."

"The entire bloody House? That must be 70 kids!"

"That's right Peter, 70 of the toughest and bravest Hogwarts has to offer, even without Potter there. He wants them as the backbone of his new pack."

"I'm afraid to ask what you told him Master."

"I told him I would think about it, which means no. I'm not handing him that much wizard talent to turn into beasts that he can then attack me with. I'm not an idiot after all." Bella and Peter, neither of whom thought their boss was an idiot anyway, stayed very still. They were rewarded with no curses flying at them.

"How far will you go Master?"

“Not nearly that far, though we will reach an accord of some kind.....before I wipe him and his followers out.”

“That will be a great day, then the only werewolf threat we’ll have will be Lupin.”

“Oh he’s no threat, not as a werewolf anyway. He wants so much to be human again, he’ll deny every werewolf impulse in him until it winds up killing him. In fact, we’ll use Lupin to destroy Greyback and his pack when the time comes.” Peter grasped it before Bella did.

“You’ll use the Order to wipe out the werewolves, and by doing that, the Order will be decimated.”

“I think it’s a fair fight Wormtail, and we simply jump on the winner immediately afterward. With the Order marginalized, we go after The Ministry and the Aurors and end this business once and for all. Once I’m in command of all of wizard Britain, Potter will be easy enough to deal with.”

Friday, August 23, 1996

Professor Lyman’s office

2:25 pm

The tutoring session was near it’s end, and as always, Lyman ended with a story about his favorite subject, the Lycans (he found the Kindred to be somewhat harmless on the whole).

“I’m telling you Harry, the last time the Lycans came after us it was a bloodbath on both sides, only it took our government idiots a year to figure this out. I mean, they were no match for your boy Fudge back in Britain, but they were pretty dense.” Harry had spent one whole tutoring session (he had them twice a week) ranting about Fudge, with the sarcastic History teacher egging him on the whole time. Harry had only met one of his teachers so far, Thomas Ripley for Defense, but he knew he wouldn’t get along with any of them better than he did with Lyman. He encouraged Harry to argue with him,

indeed most of their sessions were just one long argument/discussion about a topic picked the time before.

“How do the two sides even know who each other are? That’s what I don’t get.”

“That’s the fun part Harry, we don’t. That’s why the wars take so long, and a lot of ‘innocent’ muggles get caught in the crossfire. Fortunately the Lycans prefer to kill us rather than bite us, they don’t want any hybrids like your friend Remus.”

“Yeah, but he fights being a werewolf.”

“Doesn’t matter Harry, people in power are only interested in what you might do, rather than what you have done.” They were interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Come in!”

It was Murray and Heyman. Harry hadn’t talked much with either of them since the press announcement, but they made a point to check in with him every few days.

“Hello Josh, Harry. How are things?”

“Professor Murray, could I take fifth year History as my sixth subject? Please? I want to see Professor Lyman in front of a class.” Lyman cracked up.

“Nice try Harry, but you should have had your big brainstorm last year. My classes are filled, since everyone has to take them.”

“Not enough bad things had happened to me then.” Murray just shook her head.

“Another convert to the cult of Lyman, I should have known better. Harry we’d like a quick word about your Sorting.”

“It’s too much to hope that I can skip it?”

“Sadly no, though I can guess your House preference. No, we just wanted to know whether you would like to go first or last. You probably don’t want to be mixed in with the Novices, and you’re the only transfer this year. It makes no difference to us, but we thought it might to you.” Harry hadn’t given this much thought, but the easy answer came quite easily.

“I’d like to go first then, if it makes no difference. I’d just as soon get it over with.” His friends had told him of how long the ceremony lasted, and didn’t want to have to wait through all of it before knowing.

“That’s fine. We’ll come get you beforehand, and have you join the first years right before the dinner starts.” Harry’s friends had explained to him that for the first night, the tables were arranged in four groups (like Hogwarts, just not one long table for each House).

“One last thing we should talk about Harry. The Hogwarts Board of Directors met on Monday, and our friend seems to have given up trying to coax you back here, and he said so in public to the Board.”

“You got an owl from Professor Hill?”

“I did, the faculty was there for the meeting, so it’s firsthand information.” She didn’t tell him about the shot Dumbledore had taken at her, though she knew it would amuse him.

“Do you believe it? Knowing Dumbledore like you do?”

“I do Harry, he’s declared himself publicly now, to go back on that would make him look very bad. He can’t afford that. Check your mail for portkeys anyway.”

“I was going to do that regardless, I have a price on my head you know.” Harry’s blasé attitude about that had always amused Murray, and somewhat worried Heyman.

“It’s come to my attention, yes. We’ll see you two at dinner.” The two administrators left, and Harry looked at his tutor.

“The cult of Lyman? Eh?”

“She exaggerates Harry, you Defense types are so easily ruffled.”

“Just because you can’t use your wand…….”

“Hey, I’m not your old ghost you know, I have wand talents thank you very much. Now, we have two sessions left. Don’t worry about the books for next time. We’ll talk about the history of the school on Wednesday, can’t have you knowing less than the Novices now can we?” The next student was at the door (Murray and Heyman had left it ajar), so Lyman shooed Harry out.

Monday, August 26, 1996

Transfiguration Classroom A

10:30 am

Harry looked at the pile of sticks on the floor, and concentrated as hard as he could on focusing his power through his wand.

Commutatus!

The sticks transformed into a small table……a rickety looking one, but a table nonetheless. Professor Palmer sat on the edge of his desk and looked pretty pleased.

“Good work Harry, that’s the best you’ve done with that spell. How tired are you?” It was Harry’s tenth try during this session with Commutatus, which was one of the more complex Transfiguration spells. He had gotten at least the form of a table on the last four tries, but Palmer was right in saying that this one was noticeably the most solid of the four.

“I’m pretty tired yeah, I think I used all of my reserves for that one.”

“It will be easier next time, we’ll work on it on Thursday during your last session. Let’s have your goal to have a sturdier looking table by your fifth try, and I think you can do it.”

“That’ll make me less tired, that’s for sure.”

“That always happens when you first learn a spell Harry. By the time you leave here you’ll be able to take that pile of sticks and make an entire dining room set out of it.” Palmer transformed the table back to sticks (much easier than the reverse) and then:

Commutatus!

What appeared then was a six seat table and six chairs, all with a nice finish as well. Palmer appeared to not even break a sweat doing so.

“That was very impressive, I can’t wait to be able to do that someday.”

“You will Harry, it comes with age and experience. Plus, your magical power is not yet done growing. Two years from now you’ll be twice the wizard you are now.”

“That’ll be cool, I’m glad I’m finally getting a chance to develop it properly.”

“Well you’ve had a good grounding in Transfiguration. This McGonagall woman knew what she was doing when she taught you. You’ll do much better this year without all of those distractions you’ve had.” Harry chuckled.

“You think I’ll be that lucky?”

“I do Harry, yes. Now before you go, I was wondering if you were interested at all in Animagus training?” Harry was a little taken aback, he didn’t think he had improved that much.

“I don’t know Professor, am I ready for that?”

“Not now you aren’t, but next summer you might be. There are some texts I can get you on what’s involved and how much work it will be. I know you’ve said that your father was one, it might be a nice way to

honor him if it's something you have a passion to do.....a passion to be an Animagus that is."

Harry didn't really want to be an Animagus, but Palmer's words about honoring his father got to him a little bit. When talking about Marauder names with his friends, they had lightly discussed what it would be like to be an Animagus. None of the others were really interested though, which could be partially explained by that all of them were from cities, except for Reiko (who had been raised at Tecumseh), where there were a lot more hazards for animals than there were in the countryside.

"I'll read any book you give me sir, though if I had to pick right now I would say no to the training." Palmer smiled at him.

"Well it's a good thing that you don't have to decide right now. It's always nice to keep your options open." He transformed the dining set back to sticks.

"Take these back to your room and get some practicing in. We'll do this again on Friday." Harry shrunk them, and picked them up. The shrinking and enlarging charms were Harry's strengths when it came to Transfiguration, and it wasn't just because of all his recent practice with them. Harry had noticed even a month earlier that the charms did not tax him very much, which was encouraging. He left the classroom to go get his broom, he wanted to do some flying before dinner.

On Thursday, Harry would make a perfect six seat table on his fourth try, without quite tiring himself as much as before. Palmer said that he was progressing wonderfully, and Harry found that praise from a teacher did wonders for his performance (only Sprout and Flitwick were free with praise at Hogwarts). He wasn't quite ready to some of the more advanced tricks, but Palmer smiled when Harry told him that he'd be bugging Sophie to learn some of them while she learned them, as he anticipated them doing a lot of studying together.....really, they were, he said after noting Palmer's smirk.

Friday, August 30, 1996

Guest Room B

5:00 pm

Knock Knock!

“Come in!” Sophie poked her head in the door, Harry was on the bed with a thick book open in front of him. She walked over and lifted it up to see what it was, it was entitled “102 Curses to Save Your Life With”

“Just some fun reading right?”

“Some of these are pretty cool actually, in the unlikely event that any Death Eaters come around here, they’ll be very sorry. How was Palmer?”

“It was fine, I’m up to speed now in there. So what’s up? Why did you want me to come here alone?” Harry got up and took her in his arms and gave her a long kiss.

“Uh oh, what did you do? Reiko told me about guys doing something like this.” Harry chuckled, and gave her a loud smooch on the forehead.

“It’s nothing you should be mad about, I’m just going to show you something. Follow me.” He went over to the trunk and opened it up. The way the fingerprint ID worked, anyone who was keyed in could open the trunk from the inside or outside, anyone who wasn’t (and only Harry and the twins were) couldn’t so much as budge it. He got to the fourth layer, and a short ladder appeared.

“Ladies first.” Sophie looked fairly surprised.

“What’s down there?”

“My little haven Sophie.....well, our haven now. Go on in.” She grabbed the ladder and went down. Harry followed her, and they wound up in an unfurnished room with stacks of books on the floor

“This is some trunk Harry. When did you get this?”

“The day before we met, Peter thought it would be a good idea to have a safe house nearby, just in case. And it has another nice little feature.”

“What kind of feature?”

He took her hand and guided her into the seventh room, the one with the floo. He was planning to disguise it eventually, but since only five.....sorry, now it was six people (plus Dobby and Winky) in the world knew about it, he hadn't felt the need.

“Is that a floo? You mean you can floo anywhere you want from here?” She had an incredulous tone of voice, but a smile on her face.

“Not quite, I can only floo to people with these kinds of trunks. Right now the only people that I know who have one are Fred and George.....and I know this because I bought theirs.”

“This is how you went back to London a couple weeks ago?” Harry could sense danger coming, and let go of her hand and pulled her into a soft hug.

“It is, and I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about it then. I wanted to make sure it worked first, and I needed to get some stuff from there in the meantime.” There was a couch in the room, as well as a couple of easy chairs and a coffee table. This was the only room that was furnished so far, the twins had brought the stuff over.

“I guess I can see why you'd want a way back there.”

“I didn't really, but Peter thought it would be good for me to keep my options open. Nobody here knows about this part of the trunk, not even Murray and Heyman. Nobody but the elves, and you and I.....and only the twins, Peter, and the guy who sold it to us back in Britain. I've only been back there that once, and the twins have come here once. Dobby and Winky use the floo to do our messaging, it saves them a lot of energy.”

“What did you mean by our 'haven'?”

"Nobody who isn't keyed into the trunk can enter it, or so much as move it. So don't get the urge to kill me right now, or you won't get out of here." That got a laugh out of her, and she gave him a quick kiss.

"When are you going to tell the others? Or are you?"

"I was going to wait until Jonas got here to tell them, so I could do it all at once. But I wanted to tell you first, much as I like them.....well you're you, and you deserved to hear about it personally and one on one." It wasn't something out of a romance novel, but Harry felt that he was doing okay with that kind of thing all in all, considering that he had no experience with it before. She gave him a tight hug in thanks.

"Thank you for that, it's nice that you thought of it like that.. Now not to be a girlfriend or anything, but you know you need some more furniture in this place right?"

"In fact I do know that. I spent two hours the other night checking this stuff for booby traps, one never knows with the twins."

"They wouldn't do that to you would they?" Harry almost died laughing hearing that.

"Oh they'd do it to me first my dearest Sophie, but it's all in good fun. I didn't find anything anyway. I was kind of counting on you helping me decorate it. Remember, I'd only had it a day when I fell for you."

"A woman's touch huh? I doubt we'll be able to get to Flackter Alley again before October or November."

"I was figuring we could just use catalogs. The twins gave me a bunch of them last week when they brought this stuff over. They'll pick the stuff up and get it over here, along with their own catalog, they're getting a bunch printed up right now."

"It's not bad, I see that there's no bed (this was the only room with furniture, which she had noticed coming in)."

“They wanted to bring one, but I told them not to. I didn’t want you thinking that I just wanted this place for us to.....” A round of furious blushing commenced from both of them. But they were 16 year old kids with hormones, and the thought certainly had occurred to them.

“Another nice thought Harry, where did you learn to be such a gentleman?”

“Hanged if I know, it’s just what I want to do I guess. It’s no trouble or act.....I don’t think I would be a good actor.”

“No you wouldn’t be, but that’s okay. Jonas is kind of an actor, which is why I think Claudia won’t admit that she likes him.”

“How is he an actor?”

“He’s kind of the ‘big man on campus’, because he’s the star Quodpot player. He claims he hates it, and most of the time I think he does.....but he’s likes it that it makes him popular. I think Claudia doesn’t want to be seen as the boytoy of the Quodpot stud.”

“Is that why you never went for him?”

“I don’t know, Jonas and I just never clicked that way.” Sophie had told Harry early on that he was her first boyfriend and kiss.

“Don’t get me wrong, Jonas is a great guy, and I think Claudia is stupid to let all the Quodpot groupies get at him.”

“So it’s more her end than his then?”

“Kind of, you’ll see how complicated it is tomorrow when he gets here.” Warrick had told Harry his theories about Jonas and Claudia, and Sophie’s weren’t too different.

“Enough about those two, let’s have dinner in here tonight, just us.”

“That’d be great.....who’s going to cook?” The very small kitchen was in the sixth compartment, with a refrigerator and two ovens (one of them microwave). It wasn’t used much though, since Harry ate all his meals with his friends. He had warned Dobby and Winky about tonight though, so everything was stocked.

“As long as you don’t mind something pretty simple, I’ll cook. How does spaghetti sound?”

“Sounds great, I can help.....well you can teach me anyway, it’s been a long time since I’ve had to cook anything. Claudia and I go to Reiko’s for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but that’s at another school, and house elves do it all.”

“Spaghetti’s easy, you boil the water and add the noodles after the water gets going. I think all we have is store bought sauce here, but it’s supposed to be good stuff. No wine unfortunately, we’ll have to rough it.”

“That’s okay, I’ll manage somehow.” They had Dobby take a note to Claudia, telling her that they would be bailing on dinner, but not where (the gang would just assume a private picnic on the Quidditch/Quodpot field, where the five of them had eaten a couple of times). Harry and Sophie would somewhat clumsily make the spaghetti and bread, and they would curl up on the couch and feed each other.....which was slow enough to lead to cold pasta, but it was very romantic all the same. After dinner, nothing happened that would turn this tale into NC-17 if it were described, but they had a lot fun.

While they were curled up with each other, Harry could help but think that he was glad he waited to explore things like this. He was glad that he hadn’t taken advantage of being ‘The Boy Who Lived’ and tried to get a Hogwarts girl in his arms like this. You see, Sophie wasn’t that good of an actress either, and Harry knew that she could not have cared less that he was famous. They dozed off for a bit, and were woken up by Winky tugging at their shirts (which were still on of course) and pointing at Harry’s watch. It was almost midnight, and after a rather long goodnight, they went back upstairs.....after first keying Sophie into the trunk. Sophie and Reiko met at their dorm

room door, and it was clear that both had been doing roughly the same thing. The two girls, close friends now for five years, didn't share all of the details with each other.....but they knew.

Saturday, August 31, 1996

The students began arriving early in the morning, a few even in time for breakfast. There was no Great Lakes Express to collect all of the students, given the sprawl of the Great Lakes constituency (Harry had often wondered at the waste of Scottish students having to floo all the way to London in order to be on the train back up to a castle relatively near their homes). Instead, students were each sent a school portkey the week before, the only caveat was that it had to be used within 400 miles of school. Muggleborns took either a bus or a plane to Chicago or Detroit, and used their portkeys from there. The other students (purebloods and mixed bloods) flooed to Milwaukee and used the portkeys from Flackter Alley. The house elf staff was marshaled to get the baggage that couldn't be taken the other way. Dobby and Winky had both decided to continue to work with Harry, rather than join the staff, but they volunteered to help with baggage duty.

The Sorting was scheduled for dinnertime, and the halls were filled with students moving back into their rooms. Roommates greeted each other, and the sound of spells being used could be heard all over, as the non-summer students got comfortable using magic again. Harry's guest room was a prime tourist spot, as a lot of returning students wanted to get a look at him. One such student was familiar to Harry, at least through stories. Claudia brought him by just after lunch. Harry's door was already open, as he was talking with a few other students.

"Harry?"

"Hey Claudia, what's up?"

"Harry Potter, this is Jonas Steele." Jonas was a few inches taller than Harry, with blond hair (though he looked nothing like Draco) and a muscular build. It should be said though, that Harry was one of the smallest boys in the Junior class, a lack of food growing up could be

considered the culprit. Harry smiled and reached out his hand, and Jonas took it with a similar smile.

"It's good to meet you Jonas, I've heard all about you."

"Same here Harry, Claudia writes that you practically walk on water." Harry turned to his friend and faked drawing his wand.

"I don't know what would possess her to do that."

"Oh she didn't say it, it's just that you snagged our Sophie, and that's the same thing as walking on water in my book." Fortunately sports fans, Sophie wasn't there at the moment, otherwise the blush on her face might explode every blood vessel in there. Harry looked at Claudia again.

"Hey, I told you the first night that Sophie was shy around guys."

"Yes you did, though I did think you were exaggerating, just for the record. How was Quodpot training Jonas? The gang tells me that you're the star here."

"It was a blast really, I got to work out with a lot of the best pro players. I stunk compared to them, but they said I showed a lot of promise."

"This was your first summer doing it right?"

"I've worked out with a couple of pro teams before, you know, a day here and there. Nothing like this though."

"I bet they don't have anything like that for Quidditch here."

"Well they might Harry, I don't know. The Quidditch league here is a pretty small one, the best players usually go to your league back in Britain. You're going to play for your House team right?" The other students had left by now, and Claudia and Jonas took the two chairs.

"That's the idea, assuming they need a Seeker.....though I could play Chaser if it came to it I guess. I don't want to get put into a

House with a four year Seeker or something and be expected to go for their job. It wouldn't really get me off on the right foot with my new Housemates." That was a good point really, and both of them acknowledged it.

"Claudia told me about the Map while I was unpacking, sounds interesting."

"It could be useful to us, are you with us on it?" Harry got up and got out the blueprint, spreading it out on the bed to show the two of them. Winky had pronounced it complete the night before, all five floors plus the Creatures paddock and the athletic field.

"Sure, I'm always up for some clandestine fun."

"Oh it'll have to be clandestine all right. I can only imagine the carnage if we get caught."

"We'll be cleaning the bathrooms with our tongues probably. Claudia said that Heyman has been pretty nice to you, but that's only because you haven't broken any rules yet."

"I've done my best to stay straight with him and Professor Murray."

"You and the girls need to be that way for this to work. Warrick and I are just wild enough to attract their attention. Claudia's always been our front woman before. She doesn't exactly have Heyman wrapped around her little finger, but...."

"I am not the front woman you dolt, just because I don't sneak around here like you and Warrick do."

"You do too sneak around here, you're just quieter at it than we are, so you don't get caught." Claudia didn't have much to say to that, so Harry took it as the truth.

"Heyman's that bad?"

"Well he's fine as long as you don't break any rules, but if you do he'll be pretty harsh in his punishments. He was like that as Charms

teacher too, so it's not him being Deputy Headmaster that does it. I mean he won't have you flogged or anything, and detentions aren't too harsh, just mind numbing." There was a tap on the door, and more people came in. Leading them were Sophie and Reiko, with two girls behind them. Sophie went up to Jonas and gave him a quick hug hello, and then sat on the bed next to Harry, who as soon as the newcomers entered the room, managed to move the blueprint behind him. Reiko introduced the newcomers:

"Harry, this is Miranda Spencer and Kelly McGarry." Miranda was an inch taller than Reiko (who barely topped five feet), with Latin features. Kelly had red hair and vaguely looked like Ginny, though with more delicate looks. Harry had heard every little detail about the Miranda/Reiko/Warrick drama, and Warrick was noticeably absent, but he did notice that Reiko was the one to introduce them.

"Nice to meet you both, Sophie and Reiko say nothing but nice things about you." He got up to shake their hands, all the while motioning behind his back with his left hand for Sophie to hide the blueprint. Reiko took his place on the bed and shielded Sophie's actions. Kelly gave him the once over, earning a smirk from Jonas.

"Nice to meet you too Harry, your pics in The Chronicle don't do you justice."

"The next one with a camera pointed at me gets the business end of my wand.....but thanks for the compliment.....it was a compliment right?" The two roommates giggled appreciatively and nodded that it indeed was a compliment.

"Anyway Harry, we just stopped by to say hi and to meet you. We need to go get our wayward boyfriends and get our stuff unpacked.....though not in that order maybe. See you around." They left the room, closing the door behind them. Claudia looked at Harry.

"The business end of your wand?"

"It seemed like a good thing to say at the time."

“Well at least you got off on the right foot with them, they’re not that bad really.” Claudia could be phlegmatic about them, since she didn’t have to live with them. They reminded Harry very distinctly of Parvati and Lavender actually, never a good sign, but he decided to give them the benefit of the doubt. He certainly wanted them to be ‘cooperative’.

“Where’s Warrick? Is he that afraid of Miranda?”

“Oh he’s helping a couple of his roommates unpack, he’ll be by later. I guess he wanted to talk with two of them to see if they can get you in their room somehow if you get put into Cortez.”

“They want to kick out Clancy?” Joseph Clancy was the fourth person in Warrick’s room, he was the Junior class star in Potions, and was widely suspected to be an informant to the teachers. Warrick reluctantly had admitted to Harry that they had no proof of anything, but Clancy had had no interest at any point in befriending the other three.....and things seemed to happen when he knew what they were doing. Harry had not commented too much on this, as they somewhat mirrored his theories about Hermione.....theories that he had been ashamed to find out were completely unjustified. Clancy was not a summer student though, nor were either of the other two. Reiko’s expression got very angry (as Warrick’s girlfriend, she had had her fair share of run-ins with Clancy).

“They’ve wanted to for years, but no one else would take him. The problem with you is that there are 12 guys in Cortez starting Junior Year, and the rooms only hold four boys each, and you’ve seen these rooms enough to know that they’re still sort of crowded with that many. So they’re going to have to do some juggling to get you in there if you’re picked for Cortez.”

“I wonder if the chairs will take that into consideration.”

“They might, you never know. I would think that it would be a small part of it, but it’s hard to say. The teachers are pretty mum on how the chairs are programmed.”

They spent the next hour hearing stories from Jonas about Quodpot camp, and Harry learned a lot more about the game than he had known before (Warrick and Claudia had explained the rules to him, but no pickup games had been attempted). Warrick joined them eventually, not divulging anything about the talk with Rick and Terry (the other two guys in his room). They kept Harry occupied for a time, all the while randomly teasing him about winding up in Proctor House, without any of them. He didn't like that idea one bit, but knew the odds were against it.

Meanwhile, the Novices, who had been told to be on campus no later than 2 pm, were all gathered in the near classrooms until the appointed time. At 3 pm they were split up into four groups, and taken on a walk outside to tour the campus. The tour was a tradition dating back over 100 years, and was done by the Senior students. The tour was little more than a slow walk over the campus, not so dissimilar to the tour that Sophie gave Harry.....and it's worth noting that Murray had asked Harry if he wanted to do it, but he had politely declined. The symbolism was heavy though, and every Senior student had been given a pep talk by Heyman before they had left in June about their responsibilities toward the Novices. There were no Prefects at Great Lakes, rather the Seniors collectively acted as the leaders in each House. They didn't give or take away points, or hand out detentions, but their job was to use peer pressure to keep the younger students in line. In reality it wasn't much different in practice from Hogwarts, where the Prefects were losing influence with every year (for example Ron and Hermione, though they would be loathe to admit it, had little or no influence with their fellow students when it came to rules).

At 5:30 pm, the Novices and Harry were herded into one of the Charms classrooms, which had been magically enlarged a little bit for the occasion. There were 49 of them in there, and Heyman called for their attention.

"Okay, listen up!" The eyes and ears of all of them snapped to him.

"The Sorting ceremony will start at 6 pm in the dining hall, that's less than half an hour from now. You will go in alphabetical order, except for Harry Potter, who as a transfer student will be Sorted first. The

Sorting details are for you to find out for yourselves, but I can tell you that it will take approximately 75-90 minutes for the whole process. So if your name is at the back alphabetically, just be patient. When the Sorting is finished, dinner will begin, and before dessert Headmistress Murray will give her welcoming address. While you're at dinner, the house elves will move your things to your assigned dormitory rooms, and you will be led to them by the Seniors. Are there any questions that don't have to do with the Sorting itself?"

Silence echoed in the room, as Heyman's qualifier had nixed all their questions. The muggleborns of course had been badgering the Seniors while on the tours, all to naught. The purebloods and mixed bloods knew all about the Sorting from their siblings and parents, but had been sworn to secrecy on pain of.....well each family had its special punishment plan. So Harry's detailed knowledge of what was to come was by no means unique.

Muted conversations resumed, but not by everyone. There were a lot of students there who talked to nobody, still trying to take it all in. Nervousness permeated the room, and every student was wondering what House he/she would be in. Because of the nature of the Sorting, and the desire to balance each House, there were no 'legacy students' (families who were always in a specific House, like the Weasleys in Gryffindor). Harry sat by himself, ironically enough this was the one room in the school where he was anonymous, since the 11 year old kids hadn't read too many history books.

While Harry and the youngsters were in the Charms classroom, the rest of the students were moving into the dining hall. The Sorting was always great fun for returning students, as their sense of glee at the nervousness of the Novices could easily be felt. It wasn't malicious glee mind you, but they fully remembered their own experiences and loved the fact that they could watch others go through it too. The Senior class was very nostalgic, since it was to be their last Sorting (except for the very few who came back as teachers). The four hardback, cushion-less chairs were set up directly in front of the staff table. Since every student was guaranteed a House slot, the fourth chair (the order was determined by lot) wasn't truly necessary, but it was there as a symbol (there's that word again). Professor Murray stood up from the temporary staff table at the front.

“Welcome back to all of you, the Sorting will begin in a few moments. Just remember the rules: no heckling or booing of any kind, and limit the cheering to polite applause.....for every student.” Every halfway intelligent student took that to mean Harry too. Murray sat back down, and a few minutes later the doors opened, and Heyman led the Novices and Harry into the room. They were placed in a mass in front of the chairs, between the student tables and the chairs. Murray rose again, and addressed the newcomers.

“Welcome to Great Lakes Magical Institute. You are now to be Sorted into your Houses, a quite simple process no matter what fears you may have had about it (she smiled at them reassuringly). When your name is called, you will sit in the chair on the far left of you. If that House’s chair finds you to be the best fit for that House, it will give you a sign within a couple of seconds. If not, you move on to the next chair and repeat the process. The chairs are, from your left to right: Shawnee House, Proctor House, Jefferson House, and Cortez House (this was no surprise, as this was the way the rows of tables were arranged as well). I will make this clear to you: If the first chair does not accept you, it simply means that you are a better fit for another House, it is not a rejection.” She paused for a moment to let this sink in for the youngsters.

“Now this year, unlike most, we have a transfer student, and he will be Sorted first. His name is Harry Potter, and he is a transfer from Hogwarts in Great Britain.” Even though all the kids knew about Harry, it still created a buzz in the room. Harry was easily identifiable to the onlookers, if only because he was the tallest among those to be Sorted (though not by much over a couple of the kids).

“Harry, if you will.” Murray motioned to him to begin the process. He approached the first chair, dreading what might happen. His heart had sunk when he heard that Cortez was the final chair, but willed his face to be impassive. It wouldn’t do to act disappointed if he didn’t get his preferred selection. His insides churning, he walked up to the first chair, sat down, and.....

Nothing.

No glow or anything like that. He looked over at Murray, and she gave him the nod to get up. The Shawnee students looked rather disappointed, Claudia in particular (she would be forking over five dollars to Jonas or Warrick if Harry went into one of their Houses). Harry got up, legs a bit less leaden, but nerves still jingling. Proctor House, though he had met a few of them over the weeks, was the one House with no one from his circle. He sat down again, and.....

Nothing. Harry was now dearly missing the argument from the Sorting Hat, or anything that could be telling him what was going on. He was now at his second choice, Jefferson House, because at least then he would probably be able to room with Jonas. Everyone from Jefferson and Cortez leaned forward as he eased himself down onto the third chair.....

Nothing. With Heyman staring pointedly at them, the members of Cortez House satisfied themselves with broad smiles and polite applause at the news that Harry Potter was now the 27th member of the Junior Class in Cortez House. Harry just sat there in the Jefferson chair, numb.....yet very pleased on the inside. It took all his Occlumency skills to remain focused enough not to look ecstatic. He sat there long enough for Murray to give him a verbal nudge.

“Harry, if you would take a quick sit in the last chair for us?” A little tittering followed, as Harry abashedly got up and sat down in the Cortez chair.....which immediately glowed, and a fog of green and white, the Cortez colors, rose a few feet above the chair. Harry walked over Sophie’s table and plopped down in the empty chair that she, Warrick, and Reiko had been saving for him. He took her hand under the table with his left and they both squeezed hard, not letting go. His right hand was busy with mock formal handshakes from Reiko and Warrick. The most disappointed students in the room, if Harry had been able to identify them, were the various Quidditch players from the other three Houses. Each of those players, in his or her own mind, had known that the team that got Harry was halfway to the Quidditch championship before the games even started.

Once Harry had sat down, the Sorting continued:

“Stuart Appleby.” Stuart, a small for his age muggleborn kid with black hair, walked up as fast as he could (without running) and quickly hopped on to the Shawnee chair, and when nothing glowed, he practically jumped to the Proctor chair.....and unfortunately for the audience, which found this to be quite amusing, the show ended there as he was chosen for Proctor House (House colors are blue and yellow).

The next few students had no fireworks, as Jefferson (red and grey) and Shawnee (black and gold) both got three students each, and an additional one for Proctor. The next real drama occurred when:

“Shane Guest.”

Shane froze in his spot, and looked as petrified as most people had ever seen a Novice. The whole room was looking at him as stood rigid, not heeding Murray’s gentle motions to come forward. Sweat was dripping off his brow, as he turned to the doors and seemed to be contemplating a run for it. Harry and Warrick looked at each other and jerked their heads at him, as if debating on what to do. After about a minute Warrick had seen enough, got up from the table, and in a few strides was beside the frightened Shane. He knelt at his side and whispered to him:

“It’s ok dude, we all felt the same way when we were your age. I know you’re scared, and it’s ok. You see my friend Harry over there? This was his second Sorting, and he was just as nervous this time as he was his first.....and this is a guy who’s fought for his life. Nobody is going to laugh at you or make fun of you. You can do it Shane, just take one step forward.”

The speech, the words of which could only be heard by the two of them, nevertheless transfixed the room. Shane took a baby step toward the chair, and then another, and another. Warrick stayed where he was and smiled encouragement when the young kid turned to look at him. A few more jerky steps and Shane made it to the Shawnee chair.....and to his everlasting gratitude, it glowed for him. The look of relief on his face was priceless, as was the look of thanks he gave to Warrick. He walked over to the Shawnee side, and took

his place at the table with their other Novices (so far). As all the eyes were on him, Murray moved over and whispered to Warrick.

“Thank you for that Warrick, that was very generous of you.”

He nodded politely at her, and rejoined his table. Reiko got up to give him a hug, and everyone in Cortez (who all liked him anyway) murmured their agreement with Murray. The Sorting continued for another hour, as the Novices wound up being split evenly between the four Houses, with Harry being the Joker so to speak in the deck of cards that were the incoming students.

Dinner began at about 7:20, and Harry’s table split a pizza, though Harry was constantly interrupted by Cortez students quietly congratulating him on being in their House. The highlight though was Claudia coming up behind them and cuffing Harry and Warrick on the backs of their heads.

“You two fixed it didn’t you?” Warrick shook his head.

“I would have, but I don’t know where they keep the chairs. Remember, we were last in Carver Cup points last year, we need him more than you do.”

“I didn’t do anything either, it’s not like I could debate with the chairs or anything.” Claudia continued to look at them half with amusement and half with suspicion. She knew that Harry would be happiest in Cortez though. Before dessert, Harry leaned over to Warrick.

“So what do you think my chances are of getting in with you?”

“Rick and Terry went to talk to Heyman a couple of hours ago, asking to replace Clancy with you if you were Sorted with us. We all know what Heyman thinks of me, so I didn’t go, but I guess he indicated that he would think about it. That’s good news though, because if Heyman likes any student in our year best, it’s Clancy. Look at it this way, if you don’t get in with us, you’ll probably get a room to yourself. All the privacy you could ever want.” He gave a jerk of his head over to Sophie. Harry didn’t let his eyes go there, but knew that his trunk would be more than sufficient when it came to privacy. He still hadn’t

told the others about the expanded trunk or it's floor yet, but was planning to when he had the twins come over. He had wanted to tell Sophie first in any case.

A few minutes later, Murray rose from her seat and cleared her throat. The voices in the room quieted down rapidly as they anticipated her speech.

"Welcome all of you to the 179th year of Great Lakes Magical Institute!" The room exploded in applause. Murray let it go on for a few seconds and then raised her hands for quiet again.

"We fully expect this year to be the best ever in our school. For you Novice Year students, and some of our others who might have forgotten them, let me introduce the faculty.

"Professor David Heyman is our Deputy Headmaster." Polite applause would greet all the teachers but one.

"For Defense, Professors Thomas Ripley and Richard Greenleaf." The two men stood and each gave half a wave, which would be repeated by the other teachers. Ripley was the teacher for Advanced, and Greenleaf had been Murray's first hire four years earlier when she filled her own teaching slot.

"For Charms, Professors Janel Maloney and Elizabeth Westin." Maloney was just senior to Westin, who had been Heyman's replacements. Both were very young and quite popular amongst the students.

"For Transfiguration, David Palmer and Hoban Washburne." Washburn was Professor Lyman's best friend among the faculty, which Harry saw as pretty promising.

"For Herbology, Kris Murphy and Ryan Chappelle." Murphy taught the advanced class.

"For Muggle Studies, Roberto Mendoza and Toby Ziegler." Ziegler taught the regular class, and thus would be Harry's instructor.

“For Divination, Penelope Dunross and Casey Tcholak.” Divination was a surprisingly popular subject among the younger years (they chose their electives after their second year too), though relatively few took it at the NEWT level.

“For Ancient Runes, Amy Allen and Harmon Murdock.”

“For Arithmancy, Michelle Forbes and Janica Kostelic.”

“For Astronomy, Richard Reilly and Katherine Smith.” Junior and Senior Year Astronomy was considered a soft option, with about 1/3 of the students taking it.

“For Potions, John Ryan and Diego Chavez.” Potions, however, was not a soft option, and was considered the hardest class of the curriculum.

“For Wandless Magic, Ray Kinsella.” There were only two years taking this class, so only one Professor was needed for it. Kinsella moonlit as a consultant for Congress and was considered quite brilliant.

“Our Librarian is Alice Hoffman.” Harry had been to the library once, but just to see it. He was still, slowly, working his way through his books from Grimmauld Place, which Remus had gotten to him right before he left (not that Remus knew he was leaving the next day).

“Our Staff Secretaries are Dolores Landingham and Debbie Fiderer.”

“The Caretaker is Riley Poole.” Despite being rather unpopular, Poole got the same polite applause. Unlike Filch though, he was a full fledged wizard, just a limited one. There was just one name left, and Murray smiled wryly as she spoke it.

“Our History teacher is Josh Lyman.” The students exploded into cheers as Lyman, laughing all the while, stood up and took a bow. The Cult of Lyman indeed. Murray was still chuckling as she continued.

“Thank you Professor Lyman. The Christmas Dance will be held the Saturday before Christmas this year, and there will be a Valentine’s Day soiree as well. I will remind all of you not to wander off campus, for any reason. Visits to Flackter Alley will begin in October, and again in December if things go well the first time. Quidditch and Quodpot team trials will be held next week, all students are welcome to try out. If you need a broom, see Professor Heyman and he will set you up. Your schedules will be given to you at dinner tomorrow night, any questions about them, see Mrs. Landingham or Mrs. Fiderer. Now, Seniors, please escort the Novices to their rooms. The rest of you, just hang out for a few minutes to let them get settled.”

The Seniors got up and started to herd their charges out the door, as the other five years stayed seated and toyed with the remains of their desserts. As the rest of the students were about to file out of the dining hall, Heyman had one last announcement to make:

“Would the Junior Class boys stick around for a few minutes, we have things to discuss.” The thirteen boys hung back, and Warrick gave Harry a significant nod. Heyman had them all gather around the staff table, and got right to the point:

“Well, we have a situation here: Where to put Harry. There are four rooms available for you, but only three are occupied at the moment. Now to state the obvious: four does not divide into thirteen evenly. Clearly we have to redistribute some of you into the fourth room. Harry, am I correct in assuming that you wish to room with Warrick here?”

“Yes sir, you are.”

“Warrick, are you, Rick, and Terry still adamant about your proposal from this afternoon?” Terry and Rick both nodded at Warrick.

“Yes sir, we are.” Heyman turned to Joe Clancy, who was eyeing Harry and Warrick with some distaste.

“Joe, it has been obvious these many years that you and your roommates don’t get along. Until now we haven’t done anything about it, because we don’t want any student to have the luxury of a

room to themselves. Harry's arrival changes things however, and due to Warrick's display during the Sorting.....well for once I'm inclined to give him what he wants. Room 6B will consist of Rick Crawford, Terry DiCarlo, Warrick Forrester, and Harry Potter. Joe, you will move over to Room 6D. Any of the rest of you that want a bigger share of a room, you may move in with Joe. If none of you choose to, then he gets the room by himself. You eight do not have to decide now, take until tomorrow night to talk amongst yourselves about it. Only two of you may move of course, and Joe does not have any veto privileges. Are there any questions? No? Good, Harry if you will give Joe a couple of hours to do his re-packing, then you can move in."

"Yes sir."

"Goodnight then boys, we'll see you tomorrow."

Warrick, Rick, and Terry went along with Clancy to their room, to make sure nothing was left behind.....nothing having a rather broad definition here. Harry returned to the guest room and packed his stuff, and had Dobby readjust the closet to it's normal size. Warrick came and got him 15 minutes later, it appeared as though Clancy hadn't unpacked that much. Harry was writing a note for Dobby to deliver to the twins.

"Well he's gone, thank goodness."

"You think any of the others will want to live with him?"

"I doubt it, but you never know. The lure of more space against the knowledge that you have to put up with him for two years. It might be tough call for one or two of them."

"He definitely doesn't like you, that's for sure. He looked at us both like we were scum."

"No, he doesn't like me. That's okay though, because the feeling is returned. It eases my conscience when the people I don't like return the favor. You're just guilty by association."

“What about Rick and Terry? Are they just going along with this to get rid of Clancy?”

“To a point, though I assured them that you’re cool and everything. They didn’t need much convincing really, though I don’t think it would have worked if it had meant five of us in there. Don’t worry, they don’t need to know about the Map.”

“I was about to ask if you’d told them about it. Six is enough people I think. The twins are still working on the spell balls, they’ll have a lot more time with the kids all up at Hogwarts tomorrow.”

“Getting nostalgic for your train ride yet?”

“Kind of I guess. The train leaves in a few hours, it’s going to be strange not to be on it.”

“Any regrets?” Harry pondered that, and then remembered a line from Chariots of Fire (the gang had watched it a few nights earlier).

“A few probably.....no doubts though.” Warrick smiled, he remembered it too.

“Glad to hear it. Let’s get your stuff up there. Wait a second, what are we going to tell Rick and Terry about Dobby and Winky? Where are they going to sleep?” In the hubbub of the night, that detail had slipped Harry’s mind. He was going to have to tell Warrick about the trunk now.

“That’s taken care of, they’re going to live in my trunk.” His friend was taken aback.

“They can enlarge one of your compartments that much?”

“The trunk is magically enhanced, the last four compartments are room sized. They’ve set up in one of them.”

“Room sized? So that’s where you and Sophie were the other night.”

“It’s not what you think, but that’s where we were.”

"I didn't say anything, after all, a closed mouth catches no flies." That was a phrase Harry had read in Noble House, his airplane book. He had taken to quoting it when talking about the Map, and Warrick had gotten in the habit of saying it as well.

"I was going to tell you guys about the trunk tomorrow, when we could get Jonas in on it."

"And you wanted to test out Jonas, didn't you?"

"I wanted to make sure, yeah. Not everyone clicks you know. He seems like a good guy though, I could have handled Jefferson with him in there."

"So if he hadn't checked out, would you have told us about the trunk?"

"I would have told you, Reiko, and Claudia, sure. It's all good though, but let's try to hold off on letting Terry and Rick know about it, as long as we can anyway." Warrick had told him that Terry and Rick were good guys, but none of the three were best friends with each other.

"Agreed, we'll figure something out tomorrow to tell the others about it. Anyway, you ready to go?" He tried to pick up the trunk, only to have his shoulder almost pulled out of its socket.

"Oh yeah, that's one of the security features of it, you can only move it if you're keyed in. Let's set you up in it." He proceeded to put Warrick's fingerprint in there, and his friend was almost able to pick it up with two fingers.

"Nifty, you Brits think of everything."

"I'm sure they do stuff like that here too, you just haven't had to find out." He finished writing his note, and Dobby popped into deliver it.

"When you get back, you and Winky should get set up in the trunk. We haven't decided how to spring you on my two new roommates yet." Dobby nodded and went off to the twins' shop to leave the

message (it was 3 am in Britain right now, and it was debatable about whether Fred or George would be awake still). They made the trip downstairs, where Heyman was impatiently waiting for them, to key Harry into the door (like he had with the guest room).

The rest of the night was spent tentatively getting to know his two new roommates. Warrick was right about the two of them, they saw Harry more as a way to get rid of Clancy than anything, but they seemed friendly enough. Harry and Warrick joined the girls in the Cortez Lounge, and eventually hit the hay around midnight.

Sunday, September 1, 1996

Harry slept in, with the help of a Silencing Charm that eliminated the noise from his roommates. He spent most of the afternoon dreading the news from Britain, hoping that there wouldn't be a Voldemort attack on the train. There was no word though, and around dinner time he relaxed, figuring that he would have heard something. He did write letters to his British friends, describing his Sorting, and finally talking about his friends. It took a couple of hours of work to do it, since he wanted to write personalized letters to all of them (he suspected that some of them might compare their letters, and he didn't want it to be another form letter like at the beginning of the summer).

He sent the letters off with Dobby, as Reiko (who didn't have her own owl) had borrowed Hedwig to write to her parents in Oklahoma. As much as any owl could look relieved, Hedwig had not exactly acted unhappy when she was told that her trans-Atlantic trips would be few and far between. The weather alone would prevent them a couple of months from now.

Dobby returned a couple of hours later with a stack of short notes from Ron, Ginny, and Neville, with longer letters from Luna and Hermione. Luna's was one of her stream of consciousness deals, but was very amusing. He passed it over to Sophie while he read the others. He could hear her laughing as she re-read passages out loud to Reiko. Hermione's was the longest, and delivered the most news:

Dear Harry,

I was glad to get your letter, and to read that you're doing so well. We all miss you very much Harry. I must admit I was surprised to see Dobby, and in an American football jersey as well. What is a Green Bay Packer anyway? Dobby seemed not to know.

Anyway, the train ride was uneventful for the most part. Malfoy made his usual appearance, but he didn't say much, Luna started asking him what brand of hair dye he used to get it so blond, and Ron and Neville were laughing so hard Malfoy didn't have much chance to get a word in. Professor Lupin came by and Malfoy and his idiots left us alone.

I'm not going to let Ron read this, so I want to apologize again for his behavior the night you came here to visit. He just feels blindsided by the whole thing, and now with you gone, he has no real good friend in his dorm room. Two nights ago he confronted Neville about what he knew about your plans, and they had quite the argument about it. I don't know why Ron waited until then to do it, but I guess he finally just put things together in his mind. Neville didn't admit to anything, but it makes sense that you would tell him, since he wasn't part of Headquarters this summer. They still talked to each other on the train ride, but I'm worried about Ron being in there with Neville, Dean, and Seamus without you. I love him, but he is pretty combative at times. I don't know how he's going to handle things without you at his side.

Dumbledore didn't mention your absence during his opening address, but a lot of people were talking about it during dinner. It's like they didn't believe the Daily Prophet and thought it was just a ruse to keep you protected. Malfoy was pretty quiet about that I must say, I expected him to be in full taunting regalia, but he wasn't. He barely looked at us the whole meal. Both Professors Lupin and Shepherd got a wild round of applause, especially Shepherd, no speeches though. I think Dumbledore learned his lesson from last year. I hope you and he can work things out eventually, maybe he can earn himself another chance with you.

Classes start tomorrow, and I know I'll miss you then, since we would have been in a lot of them together. I want to apologize for my comment in that letter about having no competition, that must have

rankled, and I don't blame you for being mad about that. I guess I took you for granted when it came to academics, but your OWL scores proved me wrong. The new Potions Professor was on the train and I got a chance to talk with him for a minute. He seems very nice, and even though he was Slytherin like Snape, he says that he couldn't care less which student is pureblood and which is muggleborn. Its encouraging, especially since he's going to be Head of House for Slytherin. Maybe he can keep Malfoy in line, I don't know.

I'm glad that you told us about your friends, they all seem very nice.....very American. Is there much culture shock for you? I wouldn't think so, wizards are wizards I would think. You get to work on computers though, that must be different. I'm glad your friend taught you how to type.

I'm not sure how much news of here that you get over there, no one is sure how much contact you have with the twins. You should be proud of them by the way, they've constantly stood up for you with their parents and with Dumbledore. Anyway, Voldemort has been quiet, nothing much has happened. They had Aurors on the train as well as Professors Lupin and Shepherd, but nothing happened. I haven't seen Professor Lupin looked so relieved in a long time. He's predicting a quiet year at school.

Okay, Dobby's back, and it looks like he has replies from the others, so I'd better wrap this up. I hope you enjoy your classes, I really envy you getting to learn Wandless Magic, maybe you can show me some things next summer when you come to visit. Take care Harry.

Love,

Hermione

It was a nice letter, and imparted more information than the ones from Ron, Ginny, and Neville combined. He noted that neither Ron nor Neville mentioned their argument, This would bear watching, Harry had a bad feeling that he would have to be a peacekeeper from a few thousand miles away. His sympathies in this were mostly with Neville, but he acknowledged the strain that Ron must be under. He carefully

folded the letters and put them in the trunk, and then went back to the Lounge.

At dinner, the schedules were released, and Harry's looked thus:

Monday:

Regular Transfiguration

9:00 am-Noon

Tuesday:

Muggle Studies

9:00 am-Noon

Advanced Defense

2:00-4:00 pm

Wednesday:

Wandless Magic:

9:00-11:00 am

Advanced Charms

2:00-4:00 pm

Thursday:

Advanced Defense

2:00-4:00 pm

Friday:

Wandless Magic

9:00-11:00 am

Advanced Charms

2:00-4:00 pm

So Harry's light day was on Monday of all days, with only three hours of class to attend. He quickly swapped schedules with the others and they compared. He had three classes with Sophie: Charms, Defense, and Wandless, just like they thought. Reiko was also in those three classes, and Claudia joined them for Defense, and Jonas for Charms. Warrick had gotten straight E's on his OWL's, so while his class rank was pretty good, he didn't make any Advanced classes. Jonas was Advanced in Potions, and would be with Harry in Muggle Studies. It didn't seem like that hard a schedule, but the others warned him that Advanced classes in particular were almost all practical, so he would be tired at the end of those days (and he had Advanced classes every day but Monday).

After dinner, they took advantage of Rick and Terry being in the Lounge, and congregated in 6B.

"Guys, I have something to show you." They did the tour, gave the same 'so that's where you were the other night' comments, and in general were very impressed. Warrick was the only one to flat out ask one question though:

"How much did this thing cost, and where can I get one?" Harry laughed.

"It's expensive mate, I don't know if your uncle gives you that much spending money. I'm not that clear on the exchange rate, but I think the two of them cost me \$10,000." Warrick didn't look dissuaded, and they all knew that a letter would be sent to his uncle pretty soon.

"So no one can get into this thing without your okay?"

“So I’ve been told. Warrick tried last night and couldn’t even lift it off the ground. I’ll key you all in when we leave. This is where Dobby and Winky will be staying, and it’s where we can keep the Map.” He went over and grabbed the blueprint, and spread it out over the coffee table. They all checked it over, Jonas of course seeing it for the first time, and no one found any errors on it. Claudia had the best idea of how to get started:

“Tonight’s assignment is that everyone puts their own dorm rooms on the Map. This will let us see an example of things, and make sure that we’re doing it right.” They all agreed, and went back up to 6B (there wasn’t enough furniture yet for them to hang out in the trunk). Once up in the room, Harry took his wand out and prepared himself:

Exostra Zothea a Tabula!

Nothing came out of his wand, but the tip glowed for about two seconds. He took that as a good sign, and went back to the trunk to get the blueprint. He unrolled it on his bed and checked.....yep, Cortez Room 6B was on there, as were six dots with tiny printed names representing the entire gang.

“Hey Jonas, started pacing would you, let’s see if we have movement on here.” They had all been crowding around the Map, but Jonas started walking and his dot moved along with him. The six of them let out a loud cheer, one room down, another hundred or so to go. Harry put the Map (not merely a blueprint anymore) back in the trunk, and keyed Jonas, Claudia, and Reiko into the system. They made the walk to the Lounge, with Claudia trying the spell out on the hallway.....and her wand tip glowed just like Harry’s. The Lounge was posted on the Map soon thereafter, and Claudia and Jonas did their hallways, Lounges, and dorm rooms as well. They all agreed that they would pick their names once the Map was complete, and any ideas they had about those names were kept to themselves.

The next day would be the first day of classes, the first of a long year.....though not long in the way you think.

End Chapter

Author's Note: I know I know, finally a new chapter. Don't worry, you won't have to wait another five months for the next one. I made a numbers screw-up in the last chapter, which I hope you'll forgive me for. I put 12 students in each House in the Sorting, while having Harry's year have twice that number. So let me fix that to have Harry's year with 16 students (two boys rooms before Harry, two girls rooms).....well 17 with Harry. This number is still bigger than the new class, but it's close enough. A reminder that some of my Kindred/Vampire descriptions are being taken from a short-lived TV series. Oh, one review that I've gotten during this interminable wait was solely focused on criticizing chapter six's title (Bladvak).....I mean c'mon now, that's reaching.

Monday, September 2, 1996

Transfiguration Classroom E

9:00 am

Day One of classes had arrived, and Harry and Warrick made the walk to their first class: Regular Transfiguration, Professor Hoban Washburn presiding. Since practically everyone in the Junior Class took Transfiguration in some way, there were two Regular classes, Cortez and Proctor in one, and Shawnee and Jefferson in the other. The classroom was similar in style to the room where Harry had been tutored by Palmer the last few weeks: thirty desks arranged in theater style seating. This particular class used about 22 of those seats, and included Terry and Rick (his other two roommates, though the two pairs did not make a point of sitting together), and Sophie's two roommates, Miranda and Kelly.

Hoban Washburn was 30 years old, with sandy hair and medium everything else. He was in his seventh year as a teacher at Great Lakes, after having been the Transfiguration whiz kid of his class at The Pathfinder School in California.....though that's all he was talented in really. Transfiguration was his only NEWT O score, and he only got one E to boot (Charms). He had an bemused air about him, and his one-liner rate was pretty good, if not Lyman's equal.

The first class was little more than review for the first two hours, as he had students demonstrating various techniques. Harry at first was called upon to change a matchstick into a football, but caused much laughter when he allowed that he didn't know what a football looked like exactly. Washburn lightly tapped the side of his head.

"Sorry Harry, forgot about that for a second. Don't worry, you're not losing your accent that quickly. Try turning it into a cricket bat instead." Harry's accent, in point of fact, was not noticeably lighter. That could be chalked up to all the British movies he was watching (plus Dobby and Winky) counteracting all of the American accents he was now listening to on a daily basis. He changed the matchstick into the cricket bat with little trouble.

Despite Palmer's assurances that McGonagall had prepared him well, Harry had still been nervous about his first class not being one of his strengths. He made it through the class okay though, after also being called on to change a glass into a plastic bowl. Not everyone passed through so easily though, and a large part of the class was Washburn doing some on the spot tutoring. He ended the class 15 minutes early with 50 pages of reading and a two page paper for homework.

"So what'd you think of Wash compared to Palmer?" Harry raised an eyebrow at 'Wash', but replied.

"I thought he was pretty cool, kind of laid back. Not as serious as Palmer. What about you? You've had them both."

"I prefer Wash on a personal level, but I think Palmer teaches more good stuff. Wash's goal is for everyone to pass the class, while Palmer wants the most E's and O's he can get." The two of them decided to bypass putting their stuff away, and headed right for the dining hall, where they met up with Jonas and the girls.

After lunch Harry decided to take advantage of his free afternoon and get his homework done. He did the required reading, and managed to only need 90 minutes to get his paper done. Reiko had given him two typing lessons in the weeks before, and he felt he didn't botch it too badly, having the computer side of the room almost to himself.. He

sat a particular computer that Warrick said that he had loaded a few games on, and played for about an hour before students started streaming in from their afternoon classes. Feeling pleased to be caught up on his first day, he spent his evening reading up on some of his favorite curse texts, preparing for Advanced Defense the next day. He and Sophie spent their studying time in the trunk, not wanting the noise distraction of the Lounge (though Silencing Charms surrounded the three televisions).

Tuesday, September 3, 1996

Muggle Studies Classroom B

9:00 am

“Welcome to Junior Year Muggle Studies. For those of you who may have forgotten, I’m Professor Ziegler.” Ziegler was of medium height, in his early fifties, and almost bald but for a ring of brown fringe. He had kind of a sad, hound dog type air about him, but Jonas swore that he was brilliant. Indeed he was the oldest of the junior teachers in their subjects. He’d been a Great Lakes teacher for 25 years, but was still junior to the 73 year old Roberto Mendoza (44 years at Great Lakes, most of anyone save Staff Secretary Dolores Landingham).

“What we’re going to accomplish this year is a comprehensive study of the muggle federal government in this country. This will build on your last two years when we covered local and state governments. You will have two term papers this year, dealing with topics that we’ll discuss later on this month. Like the last time you had me (for these kids it was two years ago), you do not need to take notes in this class, a handout will be sent to your rooms tomorrow with an exact transcript of what I say. I want you to concentrate on the words, rather than with the hassle of trying to scribble them all down. The only grades in this class will be for the term papers, class participation, and the year end exam in June. These three will be weighted equally, so if you’re weak in one area, you can make it up with the others. Are there any questions?” Seeing none, he started his lecture.

Ziegler proceeded to talk non-stop for the next three hours, minus one ten minute bathroom break, about how the President of the United States (muggle) was elected, giving countless examples of past elections and candidates. Harry had only vaguely even heard of a few of the names Ziegler mentioned (yes, he knew who Clinton was, but not much beyond him), but listened with rapt attention. There was no pause for questions, but Ziegler assured them that they would have a discussion next time, based on his lecture and the assigned reading. That was how the class was to be apparently, a lecture one week and a discussion the next. Of the 51 people in the Junior Class, only eight were in this class, which promised for a lot of discussion time for each kid, and Harry was looking forward to that. His time with Lyman had regrettably come to an end for awhile, but he had enjoyed the give and take, and had hopes that this might be similar. The class ended right on the stroke of noon, and Ziegler assigned 100 pages of reading out of the main textbook. Ziegler held Harry back for a moment.

“If you like Harry, I can have my lecture notes from the last two years delivered to you, covering the local and state governments. You won’t be tested on any of it until the NEWT of course, but it will be useful I think.”

“Thank you sir, I know I have a lot to catch up on in this subject. I have to admit that I don’t know much about muggle government in Britain either.”

“We can do something about that next summer, it’s my turn to stay for the summer program. Professor Lyman said that you seem to pick this stuff up pretty well, so I’m not worried. Anyway, go eat. We’ll talk next time.” Harry left for lunch, Jonas had waited for him just outside the classroom.

Lunch consisted of speculation about what Advanced Defense would be like. Rumors had floated down from upperclassmen over the years, but the prevailing word had always been ‘you have to see it for yourself.’ Warrick and Jonas had Regular Defense during much of the same time period (Regular classes being one three hour session

rather than two sessions of two hours each), and they wished their friends well.....and hoped they wouldn't be sent to the Med Station at any point.

Defense Training Room A

2:00 pm

There were ten of them in the class, the crème de la crème of the Junior Year in Defense (this is not an abbreviation by the way, the whole title is Defense, you'll find out why soon enough). The only Cortez students were Harry, Sophie, and Reiko. Ironically, the highest rated House in Junior Year Defense was Jefferson, but they only qualified two students for Advanced, the rest of the House getting E's or A's (no one failed, the only House to claim that feat). They did, however, boast the number one student in Defense for the year, a young man named Drew Baylor. Harry had briefly spoken to him a couple of times, as he was Jonas' roommate, though Jonas and Drew weren't close. He was considered a bit of a loner, which was strange given his connections (his mother was a member of the Wizard Congress, his father an Auror). During their brief meetings Harry didn't sense any hostility from Drew, but no real sense of 'hey, I'd love to get to know the famous Harry Potter' either.

The classroom was unlike anything Harry had ever seen. It was not even a classroom in a sense, but a training room, magically mocked up to look like a regular urban street. Like Murray had told him, Advanced Defense was subtitled Basic Combat, and combat in America was more of the urban kind of fight, what with Wizards v. Kindred v. Lycans and all their various permutations not going for mass warfare on open battlefields.

Professor Ripley was standing at the room's entrance, handed them strips of cloth, and told them to stay around the doorway. The 44 year old Ripley was about 6' tall and very slim, with short brown hair and glasses that were almost the same style as Harry's. Despite his unassuming appearance, he had been a top Auror for 15 years before joining the Great Lakes staff. He and Harry had had a couple of brief talks, and at his request, Harry had told him about the DOM fight and who had done what. Ripley was surprisingly not critical of

the British Auror Command, and had good things to say about Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, whom Harry had heard much about, but never met (he reckoned he might meet him at the Malfoy trial next month). Once all ten were there, Ripley began the class.

“Welcome to Advanced Defense. You are here because you are the nine students who got O’s on your Defense OWL exam, plus Harry here, who had the highest OWL score in Europe.....and it looks like he didn’t know that, so at least one of you will have learned something today. For the first part of the lesson we’re going to have some review, but likely not a review similar to your other classes. Duels have so far not been a prime part of your Defense education here, in no small part because it’s been over 40 years since the last wizard war here in America. Times are changing though, Dark Wizards are on the rise in China, Australia, and obviously in Great Britain. Taking that into consideration, part of your course curriculum has been changed. Normally you would spent the entire year training to fight off Kindred and Lycans, and you will still do a lot of that. But you will also learn to fight other wizards, ones who would stop at nothing to do you harm.”

“What we’re going to do today is a mass duel, the ten of you against each other.....though not yet against me. It’s every boy and every girl for themselves, with one simple goal: Present me with nine wands other than your own. That’s when the exercise ends. Now there are couple of small little rules: No teamwork, no physical assaults, no curses that would put anyone in danger of the Med Station.....and the last one, my favorite: You can only use Stupefy twice. Hence, creativity is your foremost ally. Any violations of these rules and you are disqualified and will serve a detention. The winner gets extra credit on their first term paper. I’m going to blindfold you and spread you out, you have that long to strategize. You’ve all seen the others perform at the Olympics, so you know what you’re all capable of.....outside of Harry, who knows nothing of your strengths and weaknesses, but is the only person here, aside from yours truly, who has actually fought for his life. You’ll all be placed in plain sight of each other this first time.....yes, you may assume that there will be many more times. Now go ahead and put your blindfolds on, and take out your wands.”

The students did so, with some trepidation. Once on, Ripley used Mobilicorpus to move them around to various spots on the street. None of them were placed in defilades or blind spots, each of the ten were in sight of the others. Harry spent every second coming up with his plan, and especially when to use his two allowed stunners.

“ All right, everyone is in place.....Accio blindfolds!” Ten blindfolds flew off as Harry quickly moved three steps to his right, which was fortunate as a hex of some sort hit the wall where he had been standing. He collided with a body to his right and he snapped off:

Impedimentia!

Right at Claudia, slowing her down to very slow motion. Her wand was almost ready to fire at him too, Harry saved by his wand arm being right next to her, while her wand (Claudia was also a right hander) had to go across her body. Impedimentia reduces one's speed by a factor of ten, so she was pretty much history. He rolled across Claudia's body (not for that reason you perverts, good grief) to avoid another hex coming across the street, his left hand grabbing her wand in the process. The hex turned out to be a Petrificus Totalus that hit Claudia on the left arm, enough to freeze her. He used his wand to throw up a strong shield and surveyed the street. Two other students were down in addition to Claudia, though neither of them were Reiko or Sophie. Harry found himself situated in the middle of the street, opposite the entrance and Ripley. There was nobody to his right, and Claudia was acting as a blocker on the left, so the only foes who could hit him were across the street. His shield soon drew attention though, and while he was looking around, multiple students started taking aim at it and began to try to batter it down.

‘No teamwork my arse’ Harry thought. He used Claudia's wand to loose a few minor jinxes across the street, none of which hit anything but the walls, causing them to crumble. He saw the rubble shower Reiko, and it gave him an idea. He pointed Claudia's wand behind him and put what remaining power he could into a series of the same curse (yet still keep his shield solid).

Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto!

Large chunks of the walls around him fell down to the ground, and Harry moved them around him to act as a wall. This had the effect of allowing him to temporarily remove the shield as he hid behind the rock wall and caught his breath. He looked around again, and saw that Drew had taken down another student (his second), though he had not yet summoned the wand.....which Harry promptly did himself:

Accio Wand!

Harry was now in possession of three wands, while Drew and Reiko each had two, three students (including Sophie) having just their own. Two Reductos hit Harry's wall, and Ripley's voice promptly rang out.

"Reducto is not to be used against another student, only against inanimate objects! If any of those spells so much as graze someone you will be disqualified!"

While the others took this in, Harry used it as an opportunity to fire a spread of Petrificus Totaluses at his nearest opponent, hitting Ray Elwood of Proctor House, who had been concentrating on trying to take out Sophie. She had been ready for this though when she saw Harry fire, and quickly scooped up the fallen wand.....which was the only mistake she made during the exercise, as Harry decided that he couldn't play favorites.....and used one of his two allotted Stupefy spells to stun his girlfriend as Elwood's wand made contact with her hand. He used Claudia's wand to summon the wands, giving him five of them.

Four students remained now: Harry, Reiko, Drew, and Amanda Knight (from Proctor House). Harry was the only one on his side of the street, while the others were spread out on the other side (in the order named in the previous sentence). Drew was ignoring Harry for the time being and concentrating on Amanda. He was using some kind of pulse spell that Harry had never seen before and was quickly battering down her shield, as Reiko was trying to circle around to

Harry's side of the street. Harry had done tons of spell reading over the last couple of months, but practically all of those spells were useless here, since he wasn't allowed to actually harm anyone.

He quickly hit on an idea, and after throwing a series of tripping jinxes at Reiko to slow her down, put it into action. He jumped into the air and quickly put a feather-light spell on himself and immediately followed it with a wind spell that shot him up like a flash. His wand acted as the rudder and engine, as within a couple of seconds he was on top of the building (one-story, as all the buildings on the fake street were).

Reiko who, being with Warrick, thought she had seen most everything, was nonplussed for a moment as Harry took aim at her:

Petrificus Totalus! Accio Reiko!

Both spells, though fired at long distance, hit her square in the chest.....not a bad feat considering he was many meters away and Reiko wasn't a large target to begin with. She was instantly frozen and within a few seconds was laying next to him on the roof, where he claimed her wands.

While this was going on, Drew had taken out Amanda and only seen the last part of Harry's work. After wondering vaguely how Harry had gotten on the roof, he set about getting him down. Deciding that the rule against Reducto didn't count here, since Harry had put himself in harm's way, he started using it on Harry's building.....all the while moving around in a random pattern so that Harry couldn't get a good bead on him. Drew was quite a powerful wizard for someone his age and his Reducto barrage was doing the job nicely, within two minutes the building was beginning to collapse and Harry was doing a little dancing. Something else was bothering him though.

"Hey Drew!"

Drew stopped his demolition exhibition and looked a bit surprised.

"What?"

“Give me a second to get Reiko down there, she’s frozen and I don’t want her to get hurt.” Drew thought this over for a second and didn’t see the harm in it.

“Fair enough, you have ten seconds.” Harry waved his thanks and quickly unfroze Reiko.

“Oh man Harry, I really wanted to be buried in rubble too.”

“Oh be quiet Reiko, get down there and stay out of the line of fire.” Reiko grabbed the edge and lowered herself down, quickly going toward Ripley once she hit the ground. This actually took 13 seconds if one is to be accurate in the telling of this tale, but Drew waited until Reiko was out of the way before starting up again. Soon the building was about seven feet high and Harry was in desperate need of some options. He wasn’t using a shield or anything of the like, since Drew was only haphazardly aiming spells at him, concentrating mostly on leveling the building. Harry idly wondered just how much endurance Drew had, and formed a plan.....but a contingency had to be done first.

He took a couple of objects out of his pocket and mixed them in with some rubble he gathered up from the roof. After making sure his captured wands were secure, he banished two piles of rubble toward Drew.....though not hitting him with them. They landed on either side and Baylor barely noticed them. His trap set, Harry took the next step:

He put the Feather-Light charm on again and floated to the next building. Since Drew hadn’t really seen it the first time (being occupied with defeating Amanda Knight), this caught him a little by surprise. He loosed a few jinxes at Harry while in mid-flight, but Harry was far enough away (and moving pretty erratically) that they missed. He resumed his building destruction project, putting more and more power into each shot, while keeping Harry occupied with jinxes and hexes as well. Harry had to admire his opponent’s endurance.....but enough was enough. He took out Sophie’s wand and started firing tripping jinxes like crazy, right at Drew.....and then Drew moved

to his left, and Harry sprung the trap: He pointed at one of the rubble piles he had thrown down:

Activate!

And up around Drew sprung up a portable swamp, courtesy of the evil genius minds of George and Fred Weasley, and their financial backer: Harry Potter.

To say that Drew was taken off guard was one of life's understatements, and Harry used his last Stupefy, hitting him point blank in the.....well Drew did flinch at the last instant you see, and a stunning spell won't do much temporary damage to the groin area, especially from 20 feet away. He collapsed in the muck, the exercise was almost over. Harry hopped down from the roof and plucked the wands from his last opponent's pocket. With a big grin on his face, he walked over to Professor Ripley and handed over his booty.

"I believe you wanted these sir."

"Well done Harry, well done." Ripley was very amused by the swamp, and after reviving the fallen students, he walked over to inspect it. Harry walked over to revive Drew, and offered his own wand to him to clean himself up. Drew did so, and asked what everyone else was thinking:

"What the hell is this thing?"

"Its what it looks like, a portable swamp. A couple of friends of mine invented it. Dead useful aren't they?" Everyone laughed, even Sophie and Reiko, who had heard much about them, but had not seen a swamp in action. Harry and Drew shook hands, and all of them got their wands back. After that, Harry poked around in the muck and managed to find the other swamp he had placed, putting it back in his pocket. Ripley surveyed the damage to the street, almost all of it caused by Harry and Drew..

"The elves aren't going to like this one bit." He was chuckling as he said this.

“Everyone follow me into the next classroom for the after action report.” They all exited the street, and filed into the room next door, a regular classroom that resembled the ones Harry had seen all during the week, but without desks, just armchairs. The ten students sat in a semi-circle around Ripley, as he set up a pensieve projector. The action had only taken about 20 minutes in total, with the last half almost being just Harry versus Drew. The professor had been standing far enough back that he was able to take in all of the action, and the students got a full view of their performances.

Sophie sat there feeling vaguely embarrassed that Harry had taken her down so easily.....but rationalized that at least she had lost to the overall winner. Reiko and Claudia felt much the same way, though Claudia let loose one zinger:

“Gee Harry, you have three friends in the class and you take us all out.....I think we need to vote on you again.”

“Ha ha Claudia.....learn to fire with your left next time.”

The rest of the class was pretty quiet, as they waited for Ripley to critique them. He was relatively easy on them, saving his most interesting analysis for the last two.

“What you saw in the last duel was spell knowledge versus tactics. Drew has been through five years of the best Defense training in America, and is the best in his class, not to mention what he gets from his father on the side.....but he has not had to use this in any non-class situations. Harry on the other hand, has had, from his own descriptions to me, no less than two lost years of Defense teaching, one mediocre year, and two decent years.....but he has had to fight for his life quite a few times, with that lack of theoretical knowledge hampering him.....which has forced him to compensate by learning to use surprise. Spells versus tactics. Drew’s spells were mostly in advance of anything Harry was using, but Harry wound up using some out of the box thinking on more than one occasion. Drew, having looked at the scene, what would you have done differently?”

“Well I don’t really know Professor, I’d have to think on that a bit. I thought I had him until the swamp thing got me. I wasn’t getting tired really, and he wasn’t using any spells that would really have done much to me.”

“True....Harry, what do you say to that?”

“He’s right actually. I’ve done a lot of spell reading lately, but they’ve all been dangerous curses and shields, nothing I could really use in an exercise like this one. If I didn’t have the swamps in my pocket, well I’m not sure what I would have done.” He left unsaid that he surely would have thought of something, but felt that it would be impolitic to say it aloud.

“Okay class, I’m going to run the show one more time. Watch what you did very carefully, I want a one page paper for next time on what you would have done differently. Harry, I want you to do it too, even though you won, think up some alternate strategies. All of you keep your papers to yourselves until you turn them in, you might be need those tactics in a future mass duel.” He ran the show again, and Harry made a point of studying Drew and Reiko, looking for signs and tells (Reiko was ranked second in Defense until Harry arrived). Once in was over, Ripley dismissed the class, and Harry and company went upstairs.

“Please tell me you girls aren’t mad at me?” He said this with a “hopeful of leniency look” on his face.

Claudia knew from watching the pensieve that she really didn’t have a leg to stand on, and admitted as much.

“Yeah, you got me fair and square Harry, no problem.” Reiko said the same.

“The whole floating thing was nicely done, it caught me and Drew by surprise sure enough. I think that won you the exercise more than the swamps did.” Sophie had Harry’s hand, but disengaged long enough to give him a light elbow in the side.

“Well at least it was you who did it, I’m glad that if I had to lose, I lost to the best.” She took his hand back, and they all wandered to the Cortez Lounge, waiting for Warrick and Jonas.....who appeared about an hour later, their three hour class getting out pretty early as well. They got the blow by blow from Harry and the ladies, and Warrick looked particularly impressed that Harry wasn’t tied up and hanging from the ceiling.

“We thought about that boyfriend, but we don’t want Harry pulling punches next time. I can’t wait to see what he can do against a Lycan or a Kindred.” Harry had only been half listening to Reiko, but started a little.

“When would I find that out?” Claudia answered for them:

“Well rumor has it that in Advanced Defense we actually get some combat practice time against them. The government has some Lycans and Kindred on the payroll for stuff like this. You know, people who’ve offended their packs and clans and are banished for whatever reason. I guess technically they’re traitors to their kind, but they’re very helpful.....if the rumors are true that is.” Harry had never even seen, to his knowledge, a vampire up close..... And the idea of fighting a werewolf, even in practice, was rather daunting. Still, it was all about learning.

They all went to dinner, and the hall was relatively full. They grabbed their usual table, and Harry was about to sit down when he noticed Drew Baylor sitting in the corner by himself, reading the Chronicle as he was about to start eating. On an impulse, Harry walked over to him.

“Hey Drew, come over and join us mate.” The other boy looked a little startled, but didn’t say no right away.

“I don’t know if Jonas and Warrick would appreciate that.” Harry didn’t know what to make of that, but he had an easy answer to it regardless.

“Well the girls won’t mind, and they pretty much run the group. C’mon.” He grabbed Drew’s newspaper, giving him little choice but to follow, levitating his plates in front of him. Harry got to his place and squeezed his chair closer to Sophie, Reiko doing the same on the other side to make room.

“We had quite the duel today, I really want to learn that pulse spell you were using.”

“I owled my dad about those swamps, your friends can expect a big order of them.” This had the noticeable effect of relaxing the rest of the table, and the girls started laughing.

“Speaking of that, when do we get to meet those twins? Will they come for a visit?”

“Soon Jonas, they’re interested to meet you guys. The trick is getting them over here.” A not so subtle hint about the trunk secret.

“They run a joke shop you said? Like Zonko’s?”

“More or less Drew, they’ve had the idea for years but the store’s only been open for a few months. They tell me that the flyers are almost ready, so you guys can see all the stuff they’ve got pretty soon.” They talked about the twins for the rest of the meal, and while he was pretty quiet, Drew was drawn into the conversation almost in spite of himself. The others had heard a lot of these stories before, but they didn’t seem to mind. After the meal, the sextet (sans Drew) went back upstairs to get their books to do some studying. While in their room, Warrick had a question:

“So what was that about, with Drew?”

“He seems like a good guy, I don’t know.....it just seemed like the thing to do at the time.....why, what’s wrong with him?” Warrick shrugged his shoulders.

“Nothing really, he’s just a loner type, studying all the time. At first he got tagged with the informer rap, you know, because of his mom and dad.....but Jonas doesn’t really believe it. He’s not a bad guy, he’s just quiet. Not like Jonas and me.....beat you to it, didn’t I?” Indeed he had, Harry had already opened his mouth and was loaded for bear.

“I didn’t say a word.”

“You didn’t have to, I know you pretty well by now. Anyway, he’s not a bad guy, I don’t mind if you bring him around.”

“What will Jonas say?” Warrick hesitated a little bit, and Harry was tempted to grab the Map to see if there might be any fighting going on.

“They’re dissimilar enough that they’re not the best of buddies, let’s put it that way.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that guy roommates around here don’t always make the best of friends.....like with you and Joe, or even with you and Rick and Terry.”

“Pure coincidence my young friend. Nobody in our House really likes Joe, and he’s not too sad about it either (Clancy now had a room to himself, as no one else had wanted to put up with him). The difference between him and Drew is that Joe’s a jerk, and Drew is just quiet. He never throws his mom in our faces, even though she might be the next President.....okay, I’m warming up to him more and more now that I’m comparing him with Clancy. Rick and Terry are decent guys, just a little slow upstairs for my tastes.” He knew that Harry made a point of checking the room for Listening Charms, so there was no risk in the insult.....Harry still being somewhat paranoid about his privacy.

“Hey, I’m not suggesting we bring him into the group quite yet.”

“Jonas will put up a bit of a fight if you do, but its nothing Claudia can’t manage. I’m faintly surprised he didn’t put up more of a fight

about you, even if you were fait accompli for almost a month before he got back. You know, threat to his popularity and all.”

Harry had been warned about such a thing from Sophie and Reiko, but nothing had really manifested itself yet. He was wary of bringing up the subject with Warrick, wondering who he would side with in case things did split. The rest of the night was spent studying, as Harry dove into his Muggle Studies homework, trying to make sense of all the unfamiliar names and locations. Included in his textbook was a pretty detailed map of The United States, and he spent time studying that as well. He made a point of doing most of his work in the Lounge, so people wouldn't wonder where he was wandering off to.

Wednesday, September 4, 1996

Special Projects Classroom A

9:00 am

Harry and six other students sat in their chairs, awaiting Professor Kinsella, who was running a couple of minutes late (which had been announced at breakfast). This was pretty the same class composition as Defense, minus Claudia and three others, and adding Jack Straw, a Proctor House sixth year who had just missed the O cut for Defense (the class comprised the five students who had gotten O's in all of the wand subjects, plus Harry and Jack, who had just missed the O in one of their subjects). The room was quite small, befitting a seven person class size, and like all the others, was totally utilitarian. At ten minutes past the hour, Kinsella hurried in. He had brown hair, was of medium height, and could stand to lose a bit of weight. He took a few seconds to call the roll, and began his spiel.

“Hello everybody, welcome to Wandless Magic. I've obviously never met any of you, but let me assure you that I'm Ray Kinsella. Don't bother with the Professor stuff while we're in class, just call me Ray.....though in front of Murray or Heyman, better stick to the formal stuff. Now first things first: put away your wands, in fact don't even bother taking them out next time, we'll never need to use them.”

Wands were stuck in pockets, and Harry, in a moment of whimsy, stuck his behind his ear, Luna like.....and yes, it drew as many odd stares here as it did at Hogwarts. He didn't care though, he'd explain to Reiko and Sophie afterward. Kinsella passed out small paper cups to everyone and resumed his place in front of them.

"Now in Advanced Charms, which all of you are in this afternoon I believe, you will work on doing your spells silently, and what we're doing here will help that. Now, at no volume louder than your normal tone of voice, I want you to point your wand hand, and try to levitate your cup. Begin."

As one, seven voices chimed out: Wingardium Leviosa.....not one cup budged, which didn't surprise Kinsella in the slightest.

"Okay, that didn't work.....good, it wasn't supposed to. I want you to focus your power on that cup, but don't be disappointed if you don't get it right away." After another 15 minutes of futility, he moved their chairs to give them some space, and began working individually with them. It took another 30 minutes for a breakthrough, as Drew managed to get his cup about three inches of air. This started a flood as everyone got their cup to move after that.....except for Harry, who was getting more and more frustrated by the minute. He threw the cup down on the ground in disgust, getting him some stares in the bargain.....and almost as an afterthought, he yelled out:

Accio Cup!

And what do you know, the cup flew right up to his hand, to his and all the other students' astonishment.

"Well done Harry, interesting that you could do the harder spell and not the easier one."

"That's the story of my life Professor.....err.....Ray." The older man chuckled, and waved the other students back to their practicing.

"Good with the Summoning Spell are you?"

“I wasn’t at first, but a couple of years ago I discovered that I really needed to learn it, and fast.....and though it took awhile, I mastered it. Now it’s one of my best spells, right along with the Patronus.”

“Yes, I’ve heard you can do that one. Interesting, now try Accio again, but at a normal tone.”

Accio Cup

Again, it flew right into his hand. Filled with confidence, Harry tried again:

Wingardium Leviosa

The cup didn’t so much move, as it flinched a bit.....but it was still more than Harry had done previously with wandless levitation. The students continued practicing, with Ray spending as much time with each of them as possible. He also gave them a couple of 15 minute breaks to rest, as this was tiring them out rapidly. By the end of class time (and this was the first of Harry’s to go the distance this week), all of the class had succeeded in at least moving their cup a few inches. Ray stressed that the levitation spell was arguably the easiest to use, so they shouldn’t get their hopes up about doing every spell wandlessly inside a week. It was a two year process, he explained to them, but they should all do pretty well (being the best wand students in their year).

A thoroughly exhausted Harry, Sophie, and Reiko staggered back to Cortez Lounge, where Harry promptly fell asleep on one of the couches. The girls were a little better off, and managed to stay awake until Warrick got there. He was coming out of Potions, and thus was completely fresh (magically). They solved the Harry problem by having Warrick use Mobilicorpus to get him to the dining hall.....which was quite the sight when they got there. Harry woke up to a sandwich being stuffed in his face, but after a hesitant “how the bloody hell did I get here” question, left well enough alone.

Charms Classroom B

2:00 pm

Harry had taken another nap after lunch, and was more or less ready to go by the time he got to Charms. This was the largest of the Advanced Classes, a credit to former Professors Heyman and Richard Segui, and current Professors Westin and Maloney. There were eighteen students in the class, including Reiko, Sophie, and Jonas.....who had not exhibited any latent irritation about Harry's reaching out to his roommate. Indeed he sat next to Drew during class, on the other side of Sophie.

Professor Janel Maloney was waiting for the class when they began trickling in. She was 29 years old, a graduate of Great Lakes eleven years ago. Tall, blond, and quite the looker, she was looked up to by the female students and ogled at by the boys. She had replaced Segui the year before Heyman was kicked upstairs, and was the youngest of the senior Professors.

"Welcome everyone to Advanced Charms, its nice to see so many O's from last year, the third highest O OWL total in the last twenty-five years in Charms, or so I'm told. We'll be doing kind of a hodgepodge for the next few months, working on various spells, and different ways of doing some old fashioned spells. The first thing we're going to work on, is what's called Silent Magic. Those of you who had Professor Kinsella this morning will have been clued in on this, but for the rest of you, the goal is this: to be able to say your incantations as quietly as possible, up to and including, not even moving your lips. Rather like a muggle ventriloquist act.....but a lot more fun. Now a bit of a warning: In Regular Charms, they're not even going to be attempting this kind of stuff until next year, so keep your tormenting of them to a minimum until then." Harry couldn't help himself and snapped his fingers in mock frustration. Maloney hit him with a dazzling smile.

"Forrester is an exception Harry, do you what you feel you must." The room exploded in laughter as Reiko in particular just shook her head (while grinning). They calmed down after a minute, and the lesson progressed much like the morning one had. Maloney had them start with simple spells and had them try them using a whisper.

Harry had learned an exhausting (not to mention frustrating) lesson of his own that morning, so he skipped right past the easy stuff and went right to the Summoning Spell.....which he nailed at a whisper. He didn't quite get it to work silently during the 90 minute exercise, but it was working well as a subtle whisper. Maloney let them out early, seeing that the Wandless students in particular were wearing down quickly by the 3:30 point. Harry waved the others to leave without him, and approached his Professor.

“Ma’am, I’m curious, will we be able to do all our magic this way eventually?”

“To a point Harry, some of the most powerful spells will still need at least some verbal incantations. The Unforgivables are almost impossible to do wandlessly, as well as the Patronus, and a few others. Are you thinking about Defense related things?”

“Yes ma’am, I tend to look at magic that way unfortunately, what I might need to fight someone or something off with.”

“Well given your history I don’t suppose I blame you. The basic offensive spells can be used silently, as can pretty much every shield I’ve tried. Defense was my second best subject here back in the day, so that’s something we’ll be working on a lot this year, and most of next year.”

“This kind of magic is best suited for Lycan and Kindred fighting? I don’t remember my older friends at Hogwarts making a big deal about silent magic.”

“The best defense against Lycans and Kindred is to get the drop on them without knowing we’re there, and silent magic allows us to do that better. We’ve never lost a war against them Harry, and we have to make sure we have that advantage in our quiver to keep it that way.”

“ Yes ma’am, so Professor Lyman told me.” Maloney got a mischievous grin when he mentioned Lyman, and Harry saw that the Cult of Lyman might not be limited to students only. He thanked her

for her time, and ran to catch up to the others. He reflected on the way upstairs that he had now experienced one session of all his classes.....but had not used his pen once to take any notes, the lessons had been entirely practical.....with the exception of Muggle Studies, where Professor Ziegler took care of the notes (a 30 page notebook had been delivered to Harry's room during lunch this day, along with a few thousand pages of the notes that Ziegler had promised him on the state and local muggle governments).

The group didn't sit together at dinner, as Harry prevailed upon Warrick to have the two of them sit with Terry and Rick, figuring that some bonding was necessary before he broke the news of Dobby and Winky to them (he still hadn't as of yet). He learned quite a bit about his roommates, as this was their first meal together (Rick and Terry weren't big talkers after lights out). Rick was the only one in the room actually from Michigan, his family had a farm near Owosso, and he was muggleborn. Terry was from Illinois (like Sophie), and his family were all police officers, though some of them were wizards, some squibs. Harry learned an interesting fact that there were a lot of squibs in the U.S., their percentage of the magical population being double what it was in Britain.

The dinner didn't turn the two pairs into the closest of friends, but Rick and Terry were impressed that Harry went to some trouble (they knew what Warrick really thought of them), and at the end, when he sprung the existence of his 'staff' on them, they reacted very well. They welcomed the idea of Dobby and Winky helping out around the room (it was long rumored around school that the house elves made sure that the best food went to the people who caused them the fewest problems). They all retired to the room, and Harry made the introductions, and everyone seemed to be very happy with the arrangements.

Thursday and Friday held no new surprises for our players. Harry was tired enough, despite two naps on Wednesday, that he slept until lunchtime on Thursday.....having only Advanced Defense in the afternoon. That lesson didn't have the fireworks of the first one, as Ripley put them through a series of drills on basic movement and evasion tactics. These tactics were designed to work against any enemy, not just Wizards. He went flying that night, in preparation for

the upcoming Quidditch trials, which were only two days away. Likewise on Friday, Charms and Wandless were just re-enforcements of the lessons learned on Wednesday, and Harry and company ended their week a lot less weary than they had feared they might.

Friday, September 6, 1996

The Oakwood Arms Hotel, Chicago, Illinois

9:00 pm (Central Time)

The six people at the table all eyed each other with some suspicion and wariness. This was a conclave of the Midwest branch of the Kindred, the five leaders of the vampire clans, and their Prince. To outsiders, the Kindred were as one, with one voice.....but in reality it was as fragile as any oligarchy.

Mark Frankel had been Prince now for almost 50 years, though he didn't look a day over 35. He was considered a brilliant war leader, and his efforts against Lycan and Wizard alike during the 1930's and 40's had won him his position. He was a Ventrue, very rich and successful in his business enterprises, but with one eye always on his enemies, both real and potential.

His Clan leaders were as disparate as one could imagine, and much of his time was spent talking them out of war with each other. Frankel's "coalition", if you will, rested on the support of the Nosferatu, Gangril, and Ventrue clans, with the Toreadors and Brujah giving him the most conflict (he also had a vote at the table, so it was usually 4-2). Still, their business enterprises were much entwined, and the last full out Kindred war had been over a century earlier. Business dealings had comprised the entire agenda so far.....then at the end, talk turned to politics.

The current state of affairs for the Kindred politically were one very uneasy, likely soon to be broken by one side, truce with the Lycans, though there was already sporadic fighting between individuals.....and a rather more solid truce with the Wizards, who generally preferred Kindred to Lycans in most cases. The muggles (though the Kindred did not use this word) officially thought that

Vampires were legends and myth, and the subject of cheesy novels rife with homo-eroticism. Unofficially there had been too many unexplainable coincidences, and Kindred were always on their guard when out amongst the muggles.

“We have one more matter to discuss. I received a letter today from the leader of the Dark Wizards in Great Britain, this Lord Voldemort. He wishes our help on a small matter.” Patrick Bauchau, leader of the Ventrue (and Frankel’s predecessor) leaned forward.

“A small matter?”

“Yes, so it would seem on the surface anyway. There has been another outbreak of Wizard fighting over there, and the Dark side has made some gains. One of the icons of the Light Wizards, a teenager named Harry Potter, has relocated here to finish his schooling.....apparently there is some dissension on his side over his role in the conflict. Voldemort wishes our aid in locating him, and perhaps in taking him.” Brujah clan leader Brian Thompson immediately scoffed.

“We’re not in the business of spying on children Mark, why should we get involved? What’s he offering in payment if we do?”

“He’s not offering payment Brian, just an assurance that a favor would be owed us. I’m bringing this before the conclave, because cooperation with this wizard would put us definitively on one side of an intra-wizard conflict, something we have resisted doing.” Nosferatu clan leader Jeff Kober had a thoughtful look on his face.

“Why even bring it up Mark? Why not just mail him back a no answer and be done with it?”

“Because war is brewing again with the Lycans, and it might be useful to have Wizards on our side this time.” The other five chewed on this for a time, until Gangril boss Channon Roe asked what they were all musing about.

“But which side are you saying we should help Mark? Which side would be more beneficial to us against the Lycans? Dark Wizards are few and far between here, I can’t see how helping one in Britain would do us much good.” Frankel looked pleased at the question.

“Yes, that’s the rub isn’t it? Now we have done a little business with the Dark Wizards in Britain before. Mainly money laundering, and some hiding of their most wanted. But like Channon said, they really can’t do much for us here.” Stacy Haiduk, the Toreador leader, wasn’t sure she liked where this was heading.

“Are you saying we should turn this information over to the Wizards here? Why would we do that?”

“As a gesture of good faith, in advance of peace talks that are being considered. The national conclave (made up of the five Princes from around The United States) is meeting a week from Wednesday in Houston to discuss a possible full military alliance with the Wizards.” The air in the room was sucked in, as this caught the clan leaders totally by surprise.

“Whose idea was this alliance Mark? Ours, or the Wizards?”

“Ours Patrick, this situation with the Lycans has gone on long enough, it has to end soon or we’ll all be in jeopardy. The current thinking is to give them certain business concessions in exchange for full use of their intelligence apparatus against the Lycans, as well as the use of their Aurors.”

“And they will agree to this? How large are the concessions?”

“Large enough for them to help us wipe out the Lycans.....then we can deal with the Wizards one on one if we so choose. They know this as well, but they view the Lycans with more suspicion and hostility than they do us.”

None of the clan leaders openly argued against the peace plan per se, but they were as one suspicious of it’s ultimate usefulness. Thompson for one thought it was a waste of time, but not one that

posed any true risks for them. Conversely, Kober was all for peace with the Wizards at most any price, as long as it was a peace between equals.....which he had his doubts it would be. Mark decided to end the meeting now while they were still somewhat thoughtful. He passed around five folders.

“I have not yet decided what to do about this letter yet, but I want your input before the national conclave. I’ve had one of my assistants prepare a brief for you to review, detailing what we know about the Wizards who want to deal with us, and about this teenage wizard they want us to watch. I will be in the office all day tomorrow, if you would like to give me your views on the subject. Is there anything else?”

No one had anything else to add to the discussion, and the other five soon left. The next day, all of them came to see him individually, and only Haiduk attempted to dissuade him from reaching out to the Light Wizards about Harry. Surprisingly, Thompson, his main rival lately among the clan leaders, gave a lukewarm endorsement for him to do what he wanted there (which Thompson assumed was to leak the letter), seeing more benefit than harm. Mark decided to bypass the Wizard government and deal directly with the source. Monday morning, he mailed off an express letter, to a certain former Auror’s mail drop.

Saturday, September 7, 1996

GLMA Athletic Field

4:00 pm

Quidditch tryouts were now upon everyone, as the ‘lesser’ sport had the afternoon to do its team selecting. Each House got one hour at the field to do its tryouts, and Cortez happened to be slotted last (Quodpot trials had been in the morning with the same parameters). Cortez Quidditch Captain John Geyser had introduced himself to Harry on Monday, telling him that since there was no Seeker returning, he saw no reason not to just slot Harry in there without a tryout. Geyser was a seventh year Beater who had been on the team every year since he started as a Novice (first year), and got the Captain job from Heyman strictly due to seniority. Cortez had finished

third the previous year in Quidditch standings, and had three players returning (all of whom you've now met).

Quodpot of course had been the focus of the day so far, and a lot of the kids trying out for Quidditch in the afternoon had not made the Quodpot team in the morning. Quodpot rules did not allow for a reserve team, the team that was on the field for the first game would have to be there all season, barring death or a genuine emergency (family related usually). Unofficially, the best Quidditch players were told to be 'ready' to sub in for Quodpot if it came to it (there was usually one such substitution each year for the four teams total). Harry had watched the Cortez Quodpot trials, and left the field only slightly less confused about the rules than when he'd arrived.

Cortez had a total of five kids trying out for the three open spots. Geyser gave them a quick introduction.

"Welcome to the Quidditch tryouts. There are three slots open this year, with three returning players and Harry, who's going to be on the team.....well because. For those of you I haven't officially met yet, I'm John Geyser, and this is my seventh year in Great Lakes and as a Beater. Warrick Forrester is in his sixth year as a Beater, and Reiko Aylesworth is in her second year as a Chaser. Harry played five years at Hogwarts as Seeker before coming here. The spots open are for Keeper, and two for Chaser. Now we only have an hour, so let's get up into the air."

Harry had flown with Warrick and Reiko quite a bit, and was pleasantly surprised at Geyser's flying ability.....his friends had filled him with so many 'Quidditch is second place here' stories that he half expected a bunch of boobs (not those kind of boobs) up there. The five kids were all first and second year students, which Geyser claimed to like, since they would be the backbone of the team once he and the three junior students all left. The brooms the others used were all the Nike brand, as Nike's owner (Phil Knight) was a closet wizard who, after much pressure, had finally gotten around to having brooms designed.....brooms that promptly drove Nimbus and Comet out of the North American market, and had Cleansweep and the Firebolt manufacturers fighting for 1/10 of the market.

Only one person tried out for Keeper, second year student Jane Abbott, which threw Harry a bit, as he'd never seen a girl Keeper before. She was pretty good though, and stopped quite a few shots from her fellow newbies. Even Reiko didn't really go wild on her with goal scoring. In the end, none of the others separated themselves from the Chaser flock, so Geyser told them what he had already planned to: They all made the team, and he would make the final selections for the Fall game based on practices. There was to be only one game in the fall, the second weekend in October for both games as a doubleheader. Then the snow would set in, and training would take place in the workout center in the basement.

Sunday, September 8, 1996

Dining Hall

2:00 pm

As soon as the tables were cleaned from lunch, longer tables were set up. It was the Club Expo, as it was called. It was semi-tradition for most students to migrate from club to club on a yearly basis, to get a wide range of experience in some different things. As Murray had explained to Harry, students were required to participate in at least one club or sport, with most clubs meeting once a week (at night) for two hours. Quidditch and Quodpot were restricted to one weekday practice and one on the weekend, for 90 minutes each (mainly due to there being eight teams jockeying for practice time on one field).

To be recognized as a official, counting for the requirement, each club had to have at least five members, and have it's purpose ratified by Heyman or Murray (for example, a "Kill All The Squibs" club would not have passed muster, no matter how many students joined it). Harry went to the Expo figuring on just joining one club at most, and privately was hoping something grabbed him that his friends weren't involved in. Warrick and Reiko weren't big advocates of the club experience themselves, nor was Jonas. Warrick and Jonas had been on teams since Novice Year, so they had never really been tempted. Reiko preferred to spend her night time studying for class or socializing, and had finally given in to her then platonic friend Warrick's Quidditch entreaties more as a way of getting out of the

club atmosphere. Claudia, on the other hand, was a club freak, she was a member of three different ones, and was not one who migrated (she was in the History, Charms, and Classic Films clubs). Sophie was in the middle, usually joining two clubs more as something to do, rather than for the added learning experiences (she also did History, and had done the Creative Writing club on three occasions).

As such, Warrick, Reiko, and Jonas didn't even show up to the Expo, while Claudia was there as the President of the History club and their table (while also re-signing up for her other clubs). Sophie quickly signed back up for History, but eschewed any other clubs while wandering around the displays with Harry. Harry was tempted by History until he found out that Lyman was rarely involved in the meetings (he had more homework than most to grade, and was a solo Professor to boot), but out of respect for Claudia, claimed he was thinking about it. After a tour around the tables, he decided to join the relatively small Wizard Chess club (eight members at that point in the day), wanting to see if the players here were anything close to Ron (none of his friends played regularly, so he couldn't tell by them). Drew was in the club, so Harry figured he would at least know one person there halfway well.

The Wizard Chess Club met on Tuesday nights, and thus didn't interfere with Quidditch practice on Thursday nights (the stadium was very well lit, and Harry had little extra trouble seeing the Snitch at night under those conditions). At the first meeting Harry wound up getting two games, one with Drew, and one with Shawnee House Sophomore Nan Mahon.....and he lost both games, though he made a match of it against Nan. His pieces, who'd grown cranky from lack of use since June (these were still the pieces he had gotten in a Christmas cracker during his first year), spent a few early minutes loudly wondering where Ron was. Harry was convinced he lost the Drew game because his pieces just couldn't fathom him having a shot of winning.....since they were so used to getting slaughtered by the veteran pieces of Ron's grandfather.

Friday, September 12, 1996

4:15 pm

Cortez Lounge

Harry, Reiko, and Sophie walked into the lounge, finally done with their class week. Maloney still had them doing silent magic, but had said that they would be moving on to new things come next Wednesday. They plopped down on one of the couches, waiting for Warrick to come back.....but they were only there for a couple of minutes before Dobby popped in. This still startled a few of the younger students, especially muggleborns who weren't used to house elves period (like at Hogwarts, the GL elves weren't often seen around the building). The older students had all heard the Dobby story by now, and liked the little fellow and his "cute" accent.

"Harry, you must come with me now." He looked quite serious when he said this, which took them all aback somewhat.

"Just me? What's going on Dobby?"

"We must go now (he started whispering now). You have visitors." Dobby didn't know what winking (no pun intended) was, but his emphasis on visitors told Harry everything he needed to know. Just then Warrick walked in the door, and Harry motioned for all of them to follow him to the room. Rick and Terry, who were still not in the loop about the trunk (other than it being where Dobby and Winky lived), weren't around, so the four of them went down the ladder one by one, and found twin red headed fellows sitting in the living room. This was their second visit to Harry's side of the trunk, he usually went over to the shop once a week late at night, when there were no prying eyes.

"Hey there mate." Said in unison of course, as they took in the newcomers. Fred gave them the once over.

"You must be Warrick, and I'm betting you're Reiko (Reiko was one quarter Japanese, and it showed just enough to tell).....and process of elimination says this is Sophie." The twins shook hands all around, and while they were smiling, the smiles were more polite than anything, which Harry noted immediately.

“What’s wrong guys? I mean not that you being here isn’t cool and all.....but something looks wrong.” George sighed and took out something: The Marauder’s Map.

“What the hell? I had Winky get this to Neville last week, how’d you guys wind up with it?” George and Fred exchanged dark looks.

“What’s wrong is that little Ronniekins again put stuff together in his mind today (Harry had shown them Hermione’s first letter) and decided that you had given this to Neville. He started ransacking Neville’s stuff in order to try and find it.....Prefect’s privilege he called it.” Harry grew a new grey hair listening to this, not his first. Fred continued:

“He didn’t find it though, Neville had it very well hid apparently. He had it stashed in the underside of your bed.....yes, its still in there, the old codger maybe thinks you’ll give in eventually. He caught Ron doing the searching though.....” Harry knew this wouldn’t have a happy ending.

“Oh bugger, what happened?”

“Well Ron wasn’t ready for it that’s for sure, Neville popped him right in the teeth.” Warrick let out a laugh, and the girls were smiling as well. Harry just shook his head in exasperation (not at them mind you).

“You know, I’m out of that castle for two weeks.....”

“You’re telling us. Well Seamus went to grab Sloper.....can you believe that moron got to be Head Boy? We’re all well shot of that dump with things like that happening.....anyway, Sloper came in and found Neville’s things widely distributed on the floor, and demanded an explanation.”

“Oh brother, please tell me he didn’t spill about the Map.” Harry’s voice had its first hopeful tone to it.

“Okay, that’s what we’ll tell you.....thankfully it’s the truth, and that Ron’s not that stupid. He made up some half-assed story about fire whisky that Sloper might have bought about anyone but Neville. Neville said as little as possible, so Sloper marched Ron down to McGonagall and she tore him a new one, saying that one more foul-up would have his badge taken away, with mum to be floored five seconds later. Ron stuck to his story though, I suppose to his credit, as stupid as it sounds to us out loud now. While this was going on, Neville grabbed the Map and hightailed it to the Owlrey, and got it back to us.”

“Who told you all this? Ron? Neville?” George took on his mother’s voice now.

“Oh that’s the best part of the story Harry dear.....Hermione sent us a detailed letter not two hours later. She tried to play peacemaker between Ron and Neville, and it sort of worked. Neville promised that he wouldn’t retaliate.....you know that he has a blanket death threat to all of Luna’s roommates right? (Harry nodded). They’ve behaved so far, so good.....I tell you, our young Neville has certainly grown up, who would have thought that? Anyway, Hermione collected all the sides to the story and mailed them to us, I guess because she assumes we’ll tell you. That’s one smart girl you know, she’s sussed out that we have some sort of communication scam going on, though she probably hasn’t figured out what it is.” Harry could easily believe that Hermione would figure things like that. The only ones not in the trunk right now who knew though, were Jonas, Claudia, Peter, Bill, and Anthony Hook (the trunk seller), and Harry wasn’t about to change that.

“What was Ginny’s reaction?” Fred let out another sigh.

“She didn’t take a side mate, and that almost set Ron off again. He figured she’d back him if nobody else would..... But she didn’t. I guess Ron’s made a few threats to Dean about snogging.....and, well, other things that they might be doing. Dean told her, and she told him if he laid a finger on Dean, it’s a finger he’d soon lose.” Harry started cackling at hearing that.

“I’d pay good money to see that.”

“So would we, I’d bet on Ginny between her and Ron, she’s vicious. Anyhow that’s the story, and why we have this to give back to you. I guess Neville thought that Ron would eventually search your bed, and he didn’t have a better place to hide it.”

“Great, a prime piece of pranking material going to waste because of Ron, that git.”

“Hermione suggested that you find a way to get over there to talk to them, they might listen to you.” Harry immediately started shaking his head.

“Uh uh, no bloody way. I’m not getting caught putting one toe into that castle, I might never leave.”

“That’s what we figured, and the next Hogsmeade visit is over a month away. We thought we might do it, but alumni aren’t exactly allowed to stroll in and out of there as they please.....(he looked over to the Americans) any suggestions would be appreciated.” Warrick had no trouble voicing the obvious.

“The heck with them Harry, let them duke it out. Sounds like Neville’s going to win anyway though.” Sophie though, was a bit more diplomatic.

“I think you should try at least once to fix it, send them a letter with a firm talking to or something.” The twins were both shaking their heads at that, but before they could say anything, Reiko voiced their thoughts.

“I doubt that would work with Ron, from how you’ve described him. I imagine he’d say that you abandoned them, so what right do you have interfering.”

“I’m with her mate, our dear little brother now sees himself as Gryffindor’s leader.....your heir if you will, he’ll assume any advice

you're giving will be for Neville's benefit." Harry hadn't gotten a letter from any of them since the day after his sorting, so he gritted his teeth and let loose a question:

"Do I dare ask if he was made Quidditch Captain?"

"Nah, that went to Katie, Hermione made sure to mention that as well. McGonagall told Ron that even if you were still there it would have gone to her, since she has so much more experience than Ron and even you." Harry knew that Ron wouldn't see it that way though.

"I'm going to go to hell for this, but something has to be done. Winky!" Winky popped into the other room and gingerly peeked around the corner.....a lesson learned from two nights previous when she had popped in unannounced and caught Harry and Sophie at.....well you can imagine I'm sure.

"Yes Harry?" He walked over to a chest of drawers in the corner and extracted two mirrors.....yes, the mirrors that Sirius had given him (Remus had given him the mate to his). He took hold of the Marauder's Map and:

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good!" The Map activated and Harry looked only two places: Gryffindor Tower, and the Library. He found what he was looking for quickly.

"Winky, I want you to go to Hogwarts and give this mirror to Hermione, she's in the library. Make sure she's alone when you explain to her what's going on, and take back the mirror when we're done talking. Got it?"

"Yes Harry, it will be done." Winky popped off, and Harry tapped his own mirror to turn it on.

"Why don't you want her to keep it Harry?"

"I don't want to turn into a crutch for these people Reiko, this is their one get out of jail free card. After this, I'm with Warrick, they can fight it out amongst themselves." A few seconds of silence ensued, as

Harry watched the Map and Hermione's position in the library. Her dot moved over to a corner (the library was surprisingly busy for 10:30 pm on a Friday night). Harry quickly shooed the twins over to the side of the room, well out of the eyeline of the mirror.

"Harry? Hello?"

"Hi there Hermione, how's it going?" The question was asked with a tinge of sarcasm, which didn't escape Hermione's attention.

"You've talked to the twins I take it?"

"I got a long letter from them today when I had Dobby do a delivery. Big doings this afternoon there I gather. Are they all still alive?"

"Yes they are, though Ron and Neville won't go near each other, let alone talk. You have the Map now?"

"I do, that's how Winky was able to find you so quickly. The twins told me of your rather insane idea that I should go over there to be a peacemaker.....tell me you were just making a joke."

"Please Harry, they won't listen to anyone else. Even Professor Lupin has tried to defuse the tension between them, but nothing else has worked."

"Well leaving aside that I'm 10,000 kilometers away at the moment, why won't Ron listen to you? For crying out loud, cut off his snogging privileges until he shapes up." Sophie and company weren't sure whether Harry wanted their presence to be known to Hermione, so they covered their mouths and started laughing uproariously. Even through the mirror, Harry could see Hermione blushing furiously.

"Harry!"

"Well why not? I know if I was acting as moronically as Ron is right now, Sophie would smack me silly. It's your job Hermione, it's what you signed on for when you chose Ron." Harry had told Hermione

about Sophie during his post-Sorting letter, though she had been conspicuous in her lack of acknowledgement of it in her return missive.

“I can’t do that Harry, he’ll think I’m turning on him too, just like he thinks Neville and Ginny have.....just like he thinks you have. I’m not saying he’s right about you, I now understand why you had to do what you did.....but he still doesn’t understand Harry.”

“I spent two hours last month trying to make him get it Hermione, and I’m done with that. If Ron hasn’t grown up by now, I don’t know what I can tell him that will change anything. Besides, you and I both know I don’t dare set foot in that castle, Dumbledore hasn’t given up on trying to get me to re-submit to his leadership, he’s just taking a break right now is all. I can’t win a duel with him right now Hermione, and that’s what it would take to get me out of that castle once I’m inside.” Surely she knew this already, Harry thought, what the hell was she playing at?

“I understand Harry, I just don’t know where else to turn to.” Harry had an idea, and couldn’t believe he didn’t think of this while talking to the twins.

“What about his parents? Try talking to Molly at the very least. He has no choice but to listen to her.” Hermione had a look on her face like she hadn’t thought of that either.

“I’ll try that, thanks. It’s hard you know, being caught in the middle like this. I love Ron, I do.....but he is getting rather impossible lately.” No kidding, Harry thought to himself. He had been wondering when Ron’s latent jealousy would come to the forefront, and now here it was.

“I’m sorry Hermione.....look, we’ll all see each other in a couple of weeks at the Death Eater trial right? I’ll try to talk to him then.” She had quite forgotten about the trials.

“Thank you, I hadn’t thought of that. We just got our summons papers yesterday, yours should be en route.”

“Yeah, the mail takes awhile to get here. Thank goodness for Dobby and Winky.”

“What does Hedwig do? She must be bored.”

“I’ve more or less loaned her to my friend Reiko, her parents are teachers at another Wizard school over here, and they like to write a lot.” They caught up on Harry’s friends for a few minutes, then Hermione had one last issue to discuss.

“I have to go in a few minutes, they close the library now at 11:00 pm for security reasons, even for Prefects, and this isn’t my night for patrol. Have you heard from Professor Lupin recently?”

“Not since school started, I was going to write him on the weekend, why?”

“Well we tried to re-start the DA…….”

“And the old git wouldn’t let you do it? That bloody ingrate, I swear I’ll…….” Hermione quickly interrupted him before a tirade ensued.

“Not quite, he is willing to let us have the DA, but with certain conditions. One is that Professor Lupin must be there for all the meetings.” Harry didn’t see how that was so bad.

“So? What’s wrong with that?”

“He also insisted that the DA be led by seventh years, Jack Sloper and Cho Chang. Besides being Head Boy and Girl, they’re also the two best seventh years in Defense.” Ah, the penny drops. Harry had never much cared for Sloper, and his feelings for Cho were always, he found in retrospect, purely skin deep. The idea of those two running the DA did not warm his heart.

“Why the hell did he insist on that? Those two have no practical experience at all! Luna would make a better leader, and her oars aren’t even all in the water. What rationale did he use?”

“He didn’t Harry, he did everything through Professor Lupin. We haven’t talked with him since the day you arrived in America.” Oh that was just wonderful, thought Harry. The old man couldn’t get at him directly, so he did the next best thing.

“How did Remus explain it to you? Or did he just announce it in class?”

“He took Ron, Neville, and I aside after class on Monday. He said that Dumbledore wanted to reassert the authority of the Head Boy and Girl. No mention was made of us, or so he claimed. I don’t know whether to believe him or not, though he did seem a little uncomfortable about the whole thing.”

“Are you guys still going to participate?”

“I don’t know, the five of us sat down in the library that night and talked about what to do. Before today I thought we might just work together, the five of us.....maybe with Dean too.....but now.....Harry, Madam Pince just announced the library is closing, I have to go.” No mention was made of continuing it in the hallway, so Winky must have told her she was taking the mirror back with her.

“Okay Hermione, we’ll do this again next week, I’ll have some ideas for you by then.....do what you can to keep the peace there okay? And don’t join the DA, keep training amongst yourselves.”

“I’ll try Harry.....thanks for calling, I appreciate it.”

“No worries Hermione, I’m glad I was able to help even a little. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight Harry.” Then the signal was cut off, and a few seconds later Winky was back with the mirror. Harry threw his friends, both English and American, a disgusted look as he put his mirrors away.

“The crap I have to put up with. You wonder now why I left!”

Indeed the three Americans were somewhat startled that Harry really hadn't been exaggerating about all of the politics he'd had to deal with at Hogwarts. For their part, Fred and George were mildly surprised that the room was being torn apart in front of their very eyes.

“Well that was fun wasn't it?” George had a wry smile on his face as he said that.

“You know there's trouble when you two are the voices of reason.” Harry said that with an exasperated grin creeping up on his face, the twins nodding in agreement.

“It's a world gone mad. Now do you lot want a look-see at the shop? Everything's closed up now, I think our little Harry can risk a trip back to bad ole Diagon Alley.” Eager looks were immediately on the faces of Reiko, Sophie, and Warrick as they nodded yes. Dobby was sent to fetch Jonas and Claudia (who they had planned to meet up with for dinner in a few minutes), and a few minutes later, the eight of them were flooing into WWW (Warrick had queried him about inviting Drew, but Harry wasn't quite ready to expand the trunk circle, if he ever would be).

They spent a good hour picking things over, with lots of “wow” being said. Harry very quietly told Fred and George that he would give them the money for whatever his friends picked out, though Fred and George would be dealing with dollars soon enough. WWW had it's catalog ready, and Harry took back 100 of them to be discreetly distributed back at GL.

“How's the new Map coming along?”

“We've got about 1/3 of it up and running. How're you coming on the spell grenades? We need those to finish it up.”

“Another couple of weeks at most, we’re getting close. One of us will be at the trial, we can give you the prototypes then.”

“I’ll probably see you the night before, I’ll be coming in through the trunk floo.”

“Don’t you need a muggle plane ride for your paper trail?”

“I’m not risking anything, even at Heathrow. Coming up through the shop is the one thing they won’t expect.”

“ Which “they” are you worried about? The Death Eaters? Dumbledore?”

“The Death Eaters won’t target me guys, they don’t want me coming back here anytime soon. No, it’s the old man I’m concerned about. I have an idea to get around him, but the less contact he and I have whilst I’m here, the better I’ll feel.”

Dinner was for eight, in Harry’s trunk (the twins hadn’t done much decorating in theirs), and Fred and George got a two hour crash course on American Wizarding culture. It was a fun night had by all, and further nights were planned for the near future.

After the rest of them were gone, Harry and Sophie relaxed on the sofa, holding each other, as between snogging interludes, they talked about the night’s events, and his Hogwarts based friends.

“ You know Sophie, I remember when life was simple.” She squeezed him tight.

“Really?”

“No.”

Saturday, September 13, 1996

Cortez Room 6B

Noon

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, the grass was really green.....and Harry was sleeping through it all like the proverbial rock. All of the practical magic he had been doing these past two weeks had worn him down a bit, and he took the opportunity to get a good, solid 12 hours of sleep. He had never used his wand so much in class than he had these two weeks, and once or twice had even missed the non-wand using Herbology and Astronomy (nothing could get him to miss Potions). Quidditch practice wasn't until 3:00 pm, he had plenty of time. He likely would have gone for thirteen hours of slumber (lunch being overrated), when he received a poke on the shoulder.

He shrugged off the poke at first, and then it became a bit more insistent.

“Go away Warrick, I'll be down later.”

“Harry.” That wasn't Warrick's voice was it? He gave in and turned over, seeing a large blur in front of him.....but it was a much paler blur than Warrick, so he fumbled for his glasses, and saw Heyman standing there in front of him.

“Professor Heyman.”

“ Good afternoon Harry.” Harry sat up, rubbing his eyes and stretching.

“I'm guessing you're not here to get me to lunch.” Heyman chuckled a bit, though it seemed a bit forced.

“Not quite Harry. Professor Murray needs to see you in her office, you have a couple of visitors.”

“Dumbledore?” The older man shook his head.

“Nope, not even close. You’re not in any trouble, I can promise you that. But you need to quick take a shower and come with me.” Harry went and did his bathroom thing and was back in 15 minutes. He followed Heyman down to Murray’s office and entered with a small amount of trepidation. He saw Murray sitting at her desk, and in the easy chairs in front of her were two men he had never seen before, dressed in muggle clothing. The older one was in an expensive looking business suit, the younger one looked more like a gang member, the way he was dressed.

“Hello Harry, thanks for coming.....or should I say thanks for waking up?” That Murray smile again.

“Your teachers are wearing me out ma’am, it’s all your fault.” A smile was returned, as he stood there wondering who the men were. Murray’s smile faded as she became serious.

“Harry, I’d like to introduce you to Mark Frankel and Channon Roe, they have something you need to see.” Mark and Channon stood up and offered their hands. Harry shook them, and immediately wondered at their very cold hands.

“Pleased to meet you both, what can I do for you?” Frankel began:

“Harry, are you aware of who I am?”

“No sir, though now that you mention it, your name does seem familiar.”

“I am the Prince of the Kindred here in the Midwest. Channon is one of my clan leaders, and my personal bodyguard.” Harry certainly knew now. Lyman may have spent more time on the Lycans in his tutoring during August, but he hadn’t neglected the Kindred.

“What could a Kindred Prince want to show someone like me?”

“A little over a week ago I received a letter concerning you, from someone who I think you know very well. This is a photocopy of the

letter, the original is safe in our files.” He took a folded sheet of parchment out of his jacket pocket, and handed it to Harry. He opened it, and began reading:

Greetings Prince Frankel,

I am writing to you on behalf of my Lord Voldemort, and I relay his greetings and good wishes to our old business colleague. We are requesting your assistance, in a matter very important to us. One of our prime enemies, a young man named Harry Potter, has emigrated to your country. He is currently residing at a school for Wizards known as The Great Lakes Magical Institute, located somewhere in upper Michigan. We would like you to set up some kind of surveillance on Great Lakes, with an eye toward a possible kidnapping of Potter, should the need here arise. We would be amiss if we did not acknowledge and warn you that Potter is a very powerful Wizard, and very dangerous.....then again if he were a weakling he would be no threat, would he?

We would not think to insult you by offering a specific money figure, but know that your help to us here will be long remembered. Please return a message to us as soon as possible with your reply, and we will supply you with all the information on Potter that you will need, as well as pictures of him.

Thank you in advance for your assistance,

Peter Pettigrew

Aide-de-Camp, Lord Voldemort

Harry re-read the letter two more times before finally believing what his eyes were telling him. He kept his face rigidly neutral as he turned to Frankel.

“This is real? You aren’t someone’s older brother here playing a joke on me?”

“No Harry, it is real. I have never met this man Pettigrew before, but we have done business with his predecessors before, so he knew how to contact us.....though our last contact was many years ago.” Harry chewed on that for a moment, and then turned to Murray.

“Ma’am, could you duplicate this letter for me please?” Not getting what his idea was, she did it nevertheless. She handed over the copy to Harry, who very carefully tore off the portion that contained the signature and title at the bottom.

“Dobby!” He popped in, and his eyes got impossibly wide when he saw Frankel.

“I know this man Harry, he is a vampire!”

“So I’ve been told.....I take it one of those predecessors was named Malfoy? (seeing a nod, he turned back to Dobby and handed him the torn part of the letter). Take this slip of paper to Remus at Hogwarts, ask him if the writing is authentic please.” Harry had never seen Heyman or Murray looked so impressed with him, as they immediately figured out what he was after.

“Yes Harry, it will be done.” With an enigmatic look at Frankel, he popped off.

“Dobby was once a Malfoy house elf, before I scammed them out of him. Remus was once Peter’s best friend, he’ll know if the signature is legit.”

“Very cautious of you, good. I know you must have a question or two, but let us wait until your little friend comes back with the proof.” Dobby was back in a few minutes, looking very shaken.

“Yes Harry, he says that the writing is real. He wants you to contact him as soon as you can, he says he has many questions.”

“He and I both. I’m guessing that you don’t want go along with their request Mr. Frankel, am I right?” Mark laughed slightly, and even Channon smiled at the obvious.

“Yes Harry, I decided that it would not be in our best interests to aid them in harming you. I’ve read about your recent adventures with great interest, it was somewhat startling to get their overture, having not had contact with them since around the time of your birth.”

“Not in your best interest? Why does that make me nervous?”

“It shouldn’t Harry, this is but one small part of a larger plan with regard to your Wizard brethren here in our country.” Eh? Harry had no idea what this man was talking about, so he looked to Murray for clarification.

“He means peace Harry, the Kindred are talking to our government about a full peace treaty and possible military alliance.”

“Were these talks happening before this letter came?”

“Yes they were, war is brewing between us and our Lycan friends, we want the help of the Wizard government. With any luck our two sides will cut a deal in the coming days, and my fellow Princes and I will ratify it at our next meeting. Your situation.....let’s just say it could have caused us problems if we had helped this man, or even if we had ignored it and done nothing at all. Besides, I’m not too interested in making war on children, however much power they may have.” He seemed sincere when he said this, and Harry acknowledged that Frankel would seem to have no other reason to show him the letter.

“Thank you for that Mr. Frankel. I appreciate you not wanting to kidnap me.” This was not said as rudely as it can be read, its just that Harry didn’t really know what to say. He ran his hands through his hair.

“I guess I just thought that if I was over here, Voldemort wouldn't bother me anymore. Naïve I suppose wasn't I?” Murray was shaking her head in disagreement.

“Harry, if I may be honest with you.....I think this is a contingency plan, nothing more. Voldemort is just making sure you're marked, in case things turn there for him and he needs to do something desperate. I can tell you that since you've arrived here, we've heightened surveillance outside the immediate area of the school, and nothing has changed. Nor has any suspicious activity been noticed in Flackter Alley. I really don't think he's making a move on you Harry, not as of yet anyway.”

“I appreciate your efforts ma'am, I really do. I guess I have only one real question: What do we do about the letter? Am I right in guessing that you haven't replied to him Mr. Frankel?”

“You are correct Harry, we wanted to show it to you first. Now as I see it, there are two options here. Number one, I send a short note, politely declining the opportunity; or number two: we pretend to play along and manipulate the situation to suit our mutual purposes.” Harry looked at his Headmistress and her Deputy. Heyman injected himself into the conversation for the first time.

“I'm for the latter personally, as long as you're willing Mark. It would give us more of a window into what this Dark Wizard is thinking, without exposing Harry to any further danger. Joanne is correct, the school is just as secure as ever, Voldemort and his boys wouldn't even get inside the building if they tried a snatch.”

“I'm with David, though I would like to consult with some of my old Auror colleagues before we say for sure. Harry? What do you think?” Harry still didn't know what to think, though he was gratified to hear about how secure the campus was.....it sure didn't look that way from the outside, which was probably the point.

“I'm inclined to say yes, agree to what he wants and find out all you can.....but I'll go along with whichever you prefer to do Mr. Frankel.”

“That will be fine, we can always end our game at anytime. If you like Joanne, I can consult with some of your old Auror friends when I go to Boston on Monday for the talks.”

“I would appreciate that Mark, yes. I’ll owl ahead and have them expecting you.” She wrote down a couple of names on a piece of paper, and handed it to Mark.

“Thank you Joanne. Now I should be going, I have much to do on the plane back to Chicago. Harry, I’ve enjoyed meeting you, I hope we get a chance to talk further sometime soon.”

“I would like that Mr. Frankel.....you know that you and Mr. Roe are the first vampires I’ve ever met.....at least that I’m sure of.”

“There are very few of us in Britain for some reason.....I suppose English blood tastes as bad your cooking over there (much laughter from the Wizards). I would enjoy the chance to tell you some of our legends.....your Joshua Lyman is very smart, but he doesn’t know everything about us. Until then, goodbye.” He and Channon shook hands with the others, and Heyman escorted them out of the building, to a car they had waiting just outside of the “farm”.....which is how the non-Wizard folk saw the school. The door was barely shut before Harry queried his Headmistress.

“Are these talks for real?”

“They’re very real Harry, war between the Kindred and Lycans is only days away perhaps. They need an edge, and they see us as it.”

“What’s in it for us? By helping them I mean.”

“Money, they’re buying our support. They’re much wealthier than the Lycans, only they can afford to do this.”

“I thought all the Wizards over here were rich too? Why would money matter?”

“Money is power Harry, and what do all people of power want? More power, which means more money. I suppose we could always just steal from the muggles outright, but there’s no challenge in that Harry, that’s why any of us hold jobs in the first place if you think about it, it gives us something interesting to do. Without that, none of us would ever work or do anything productive.” With that last Machiavellian sally, Murray sent Harry off to the dining hall to get his lunch, with an admonishment not to share any of this with his friends until the peace treaty was signed, sealed, and delivered.

The peace treaty was signed and announced the next Thursday, with Wizard President Michael Chabon and Mark Frankel (representing his fellow Princes, they were all equal in power and influence) posing for pictures while signing the document. The news was trumpeted in The Chronicle the next day, and Harry quietly told his friends about his very peripheral role in the end of the process. They were all aghast at his story, and they resolved to be even more careful when they were outside the main doors. The first Flackter Alley visit was in just over a month, and they would have to be on their toes the entire time.

Frankel sent him a short letter the next day, informing him that he had “agreed” to do Voldemort his favor, telling the bad man that the treaty was one of convenience, not of substance. By now though, the entire American Wizard leadership knew of the game, and were fully on board with it. It irritated President Chabon in particular that Voldemort would be interfering somewhere he didn’t belong (don’t you just love righteous indignation?).

Harry ultimately decided not to tell anyone in Britain what was going on, as he did not trust the Order not to have any moles in it.....he was still convinced that Snape was really Voldemort’s man, and had no illusions that Dumbledore had dropped him. Bill had warned him of the rapprochement between Remus and Dumbledore, so he ignored the werewolf’s increasingly strident messages for clarification of the Dobby mission, the oath Remus swore at the will reading be damned. Nor did he say anything about it to Hermione when he mirror called her on Saturday. There was a continued truce between Ron and Neville, though they really couldn’t be called friends anymore.....rather they were allies of necessity. Harry again

promised he would talk to both of them at the trial, though it would have to be a quick talk since he wasn't planning to be in public view any more than absolutely necessary. Hermione had taken his advice and the five of them were boycotting the new DA, as was Dean (for obvious reasons) and a few other Gryffindors.

Against his better judgment, Harry had Hermione turn the mirror over to Luna for a few minutes, as they were in the library studying together (Luna is a Ravenclaw remember). Luna was surprisingly lucid (Harry had often wondered if she was shamming all that just a bit), and Harry talked to her about Neville and getting him to lay off Ron, if possible. She told him that she had already done so, and that things while there was no love lost, things were progressing as well as could be expected. A few minutes turned into 15 or so, as the one Hogwarts person Sophie was dying to meet was Luna, so the girls chatted for a time and became fast friends. It helped that Sophie was all for diplomacy when it came to Ron and Neville.

Monday, September 23, 1996

Office of the Headmistress

12:15 am

Holding a short note in his hands, Harry approached Murray's door for the second time in less than two weeks. He wondered if it was the Lycan leader's turn to want to meet him, he found it hard to believe that Voldemort would stop at just the vampires. After being bidden to enter, he yet again found two visitors awaiting him.....but this time they were quite familiar faces:

Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Nymphadora Tonks, Auror. Harry knew he shouldn't have been surprised, but he hadn't expected a personal touch.

Five days earlier, while watching a muggle crime movie with his friends, he had come to a series of belated realizations about the upcoming trials and his public return to Great Britain. He sent off a long message to Peter Tyson, outlining his concerns and some potential remedies. Tyson had sent Dobby back with an

acknowledgement, and a promise to address them at the Ministry the next day. That was last Thursday, and he presumed his answers were being delivered now.

“Hello Madam Bones, Wotcher Tonks.”

“Hello Harry.”

“Wotcher Harry.” He surprised Bones by giving Tonks a quick hug.....more to make Tonks uncomfortable than anything, given their last encounter at Gringotts.....though she was a very attractive Witch.

“What brings you by? Quite a long portkey ride I imagine.” The look on Bones face was priceless.

“We have the trials to discuss Harry, and Peter Tyson’s demands on your behalf.”

“Well I wouldn’t call them demands Madam Bones, as much as guarantees that I feel are my right.” Murray couldn’t have looked more lost, so Harry explained for her benefit.

“I was watching A Few Good Men last week in the lounge, and came to the realization that I, in fact, did commit a crime or two during the Department of Mysteries fiasco. So I sent Dobby to have Peter Tyson get me a grant of immunity from prosecution. I don’ t know if those kinds of things are dealt with in Wizard law, but better safe than sorry. I believe I wanted it in writing, correct Madam Bones?” Bones pulled a piece of parchment from a rather muggle looking attaché case she had with her.

“Correct Harry, though we had no intention of charging you with anything. The Ministry wouldn’t survive the firestorm if we did.”

“I’m really going to bet my freedom on rational decision making by Cornelius Fudge and Albus Dumbledore.....right.” Murray couldn’t help but burst out laughing, and Tonks was fighting a grin as well.

“Very funny Harry, and even though your request was noticeably lacking in their regard, yesterday I handed similar guarantees to Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, and Ron and Ginny Weasley.”

“Oh I was sure they wouldn’t be charged with anything Madam Bones.....though I’m sure I wouldn’t have been put in Azkaban.....just consigned to two years house arrest at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” As plausible as that sounded, Bones couldn’t stand it anymore, she had to ask.

“What happened between you and Albus? Why do you mistrust him so much? I don’t blame you not trusting Fudge, I’d be suspicious of anyone who did.....but Dumbledore as well?”

“That’s a long answer to a complicated question Madam Bones, and one I prefer not to get into at the moment if you don’t mind.” Though this was said in a polite tone of voice, Bones looked like she minded quite a bit.....but saw Murray nodding in support of her student, and came to the belated realization that she was a guest in this office, and had no authority.

“Fair enough I suppose. Mr. Tyson also asked me to give you an update on Snape. Thus far he has met the terms of his house arrest, and nothing unusual has gone on in regards to him. Before you ask, yes, Dumbledore visits him periodically.....but that is his right, as Head of the Wizengamot. I agree that it should probably not reassure you about Albus, but there it is.”

No it did not reassure Harry in the slightest, and the look on his face communicated this more clearly than any of his words could. He set that aside for a moment, and readdressed Bones.

“Figures. Anyway, do you have the last document I asked for?” Bones’ face did its own communicating, but she pulled another document from her case, and handed it to Harry.....who did a thorough read of it (though it was quite short), and passed it over to Murray.

We the undersigned, do swear a written Wizard's Oath that Harry Potter will be protected at all costs from Albus Dumbledore before, during, and after his appearance at the trial of Lucious Malfoy, to take place on Monday, September 30, 1996. We further stipulate that said protection includes any attempts at physical assault or kidnapping by Dumbledore, members of The Order of the Phoenix, Hogwarts' Staff, or any Ministry personnel under his control or influence.

Signed

Amelia Bones

Head of Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Rufus Scrimgeour

Head Auror

Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

"Harry, may I ask whose idea this was? Yours? Tyson's?"

"I believe in being thorough Madam Bones, trust me when I tell you that I wish this document wasn't necessary....but I need the reassurance." Bones just shrugged, she could tell that any argument she made would fall on deaf ears. Tonks sat there in silence, though inwardly she was howling with laughter at what Dumbledore would be thinking if he could hear any of this (they had been checked for charms before being allowed in the office, so he wasn't listening right now).

They spent the next half hour going over Harry's testimony, as Bones would be the prosecutor. She, without prompting, agreed to have Harry go first, in deference to his long travel journey. Murray gave him a piece of paper as well, signed by her and Wash, officially giving

Harry permission to leave campus and skip Transfiguration. Before they left, Bones had a few final matters to bring up.

“Have you made your travel arrangements Harry? I’m assuming you will be taking muggle air transport.”

“I have made my arrangements Madam Bones, but I’ve arranged for a portkey to take me there and back. Me coming in on an airplane is too obvious, and I don’t want anyone to know where I am until I actually get to the Ministry.” All three women raised their eyebrows, but didn’t say anything.

“Good enough, I trust then that you will present yourself at the Ministry no later than 9:00 am next Monday.”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll be there. Tell me, is there any chance of a plea bargain?”

“There is always a chance Harry, we offered Malfoy one months ago: 15 years in Azkaban in exchange for pleading guilty, but he refused it, as did all his other compatriots. We put them under Veritaserum long ago, to see if they knew where Voldemort is hiding, but that information must have been erased from their minds before their mission.” Bones and Tonks got up and said their goodbyes. Harry waited until they were just out the door:

“Madam Bones, could you come back here a second, you dropped something!” Tonks waited in the hallway while Bones came back.

“I’m sorry to have dodged your question about Dumbledore ma’am, but I’m assuming he might do some mind work on Tonks to find out what I said today, I don’t want to give him any insight if I can help it.” Bones expression toward him softened a tad after hearing that, though inwardly she was saddened that such a bright (not to mention powerful) young man was reduced to this level of paranoia.

“Thank you for that Harry, I’ll see you next week.” She departed, one of house elves was waiting for the two of them to take them

outside, where international portkeys tended to work better. Back in the office, Murray gave Harry a searching look.

“A portkey Harry?”

“Something like that ma’am. They won’t know where I am or how I got there.....just how I like it.”

“I was going to ask you if you wanted someone from here to come with you.” That wasn’t a half bad idea now that he thought about it, but in the end, if Dumbledore really wanted him, one American Wizard wasn’t going to be of much help.

“I’ll be fine Professor, but thank you for offering.”

“Run along to lunch now, enjoy your afternoon off.”

“Thank you ma’am.” He collected his papers and left; all the while wondering if Murray had an inkling of his trunk floo. He chided himself though, he really was getting too paranoid.

Wednesday, September 25, 1996

Harry’s trunk

6:00 pm

Wednesday night Harry decided to surprise Sophie, so he cooked her dinner in the trunk. No friends, no elves, just the two of them. He had an ulterior motive, having gotten another missive from the twins during lunchtime, the contents of which he kept private until now. They finished their Grilled Chicken Fettuccine Alfredo and salads, and were lazily doing the dishes.

“This is nice Harry, thank you. You’re very sweet.”

“You’re very welcome Sophie, I wish we could get away with doing this more often.”

“I don’t know, that makes it more special, that we can’t do it every night.” Do dinner like this is what she meant folks.

“I get you, and you’re right. But there is something we need to talk about for a minute.” Sophie got a look on her face that immediately sprung Harry into action. He really needed to learn to transition these things better.

“Oh no, it’s nothing bad.....well not from my point of view, you might think so.....I’m not really sure.” Sophie’s face went from looking like she was about to cry, to one of confusion. Harry pulled a shrunken magazine out of his pocket, and enlarged it. It was the current copy of Witch Weekly, and a certain scar-headed Wizard teenager was on the cover.

“This came out today, its what the twins got to me during lunch.” He handed to her.

The headline said it all:

Harry Potter’s New Love! The Yank Who Stole His Heart!

There was no picture of Sophie, thank goodness, but that’s about all it lacked. The accompanying article had most of the broad facts of the Harry/Sophie relationship correct, and only a few of the small details wrong. There was a lot they didn’t have of course, which ruled out Warrick, Reiko, Jonas, or Claudia as the source(s).

“Umm.....wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“I just thought you should know. I don’t know how much coverage this is going to get here, but I’m betting that we should expect some. Howlers must take awhile to get here from over there, they should get here tomorrow.” While Great Lakes students didn’t actually “experience” any Howlers that were addressed to them, they were told of their existence when they came. At last count, Harry had received 45 Howlers since The Chronicle article that had revealed him to be here.....which was still roughly one-fifth of those sent to Hogwarts about the same subject.

“How would they even know about us? One of our schoolmates told them?”

“Probably, unless Hermione told Ron, and he did it for spite or something.” Now that he thought of that, it made quite a bit of sense. Something else to buttonhole Ron about on Monday.

“It’s okay Harry, I’m not upset.....I’m proud to be your girlfriend, and I can take any Howlers that come my way. I just don’t understand why they would care so much about your personal life. I mean I know you’re famous over there, but you are still just a teenager.” Harry smiled ruefully, even from his limited knowledge of muggle media, he knew it wasn’t just Witch Weekly and The Daily Prophet that did this.

“This is nothing compared to Fleet Street back home, if you’re famous you’re fair game, period. I agree that in principle it’s none of their business, but there’s nothing we can do. You’ll never have to go there, and I doubt any of their reporters will be able gain entrance here to bother us.”

“Will I catch you in the Howler count you think?”

“Maybe, but I have a big head start.” He grinned saying this, and pulled her into a long hug. They relaxed the rest of the night, and at the end, when they were saying goodnight, he murmured to her.

“The next time I have to launch a Patronus, I know the happy memory I’m going to use.”

Friday, September 27, 1996

Number 12 Grimmauld Place

7:00 pm (London Time)

The weekly meeting of The Order of the Phoenix went in fairly normal fashion for the first part. All of the known members were present, including the Hogwarts contingent, bellies full from dinner. Mundane

matters having been dealt with, Dumbledore proceeded to talk of the upcoming trials.

“Tonks, I understand that you and Amelia visited Harry this week.”

“Yes Headmaster, he’s looking very well…….I’d like to tell you he passed along his best wishes to you…….” Fred and George openly started giggling, earning them a glare from Molly and a rueful shake of the head from Arthur. Dumbledore let it pass though, as by and large he ignored the twins and their tomfoolery.

“He is still planning to testify?”

“He is, we went over his story very thoroughly. I’m betting we get convictions based just on his testimony, let alone the other kids, or us.”

“When is he arriving?” This seemed like an innocuous question, and it very well may have been, but Tonks wasn’t going there.

“I’m sorry Headmaster, but that’s really not your business.” This got everyone perked up right away, and Dumbledore (who knew full well what she meant), gave her an opportunity to take it back.

“Excuse me Tonks, but what did you say?” All Aurors undergo Occlumency training, and Tonks slammed her shields up to full mental power.

“Based on our meeting with Harry, I don’t believe he wants you to have that information. He’s still rather bitter about you, and…….well he’s a bit concerned about a kidnap attempt.” Not one Weasley looked surprised at hearing that, even Molly…….but the rest of them, even Remus, were aghast. McGonagall could hardly believe it.

“A kidnap attempt by whom? Surely not by anyone here!”

“Especially by people here Minerva.” She took a deep breath, and decided that Harry’s “oath document” would become semi-public soon enough anyway.

“He had Bones, Rufus, and Fudge all sign Wizard Oaths protecting him from you, and all of us here.....aside from Remus and myself of course.” They had each individually told Dumbledore about their oaths at the bank. Hagrid had never looked more hurt in his life, and McGonagall looked like she badly wanted to curse someone. Tellingly, there was little visible reaction from Dumbledore.

“I gather it was either agree to that, or he wouldn’t testify?”

“That was the deal, according to his representative that dealt with Fudge. It would have taken the entire Auror Command to fight our way in there to compel him to come testify, and even then I’m not sure it would have worked. That place is loaded with defense mechanisms, and that’s just from what I saw on the walk in.....Amelia and I didn’t exactly get a tour. But on the whole, I’d say it was a more secure building than Hogwarts Castle.” Molly looked hard at Dumbledore, as hard as she had looked at him since the night she threatened to kill him.

“Albus, swear to us right now that you had no intention of trying to compel him to remain here.” She was very careful not to say the word “kidnapping”.

“I have no trouble swearing to that Molly, since it’s the truth. I know full well that Harry wants no contact with me, and I will abide by his wishes. He will be back at Great Lakes in time for dinner on Monday, if he so chooses. You have my oath.” That even seemed to satisfy Fred and George, who had every intention of spilling the details to Harry as soon as they got home. McGonagall still did not look satisfied, and looked to be about to object, when she was headed off by Arthur of all people.

“Let it go Minerva, Harry is coming and he’s going to testify, that should be enough for you.....or anybody else. Yes, he’s become overly paranoid, but he has cause.....and I for one am tired of

people criticizing him for it. He is what we've all helped make him, and frankly I am ashamed. Outside of Sirius, the people in this room are his adult figures.....and we've done a damn poor job of raising him if you ask me. Now Monday when he comes here, let him be. Just get his testimony, and then let him go back to America and be happy for once in his life." Arthur finished his somewhat bitter sounding soliloquy, and it did have it's desired effect: it shut up McGonagall quite effectively.

This was not as spontaneous as one might think, the twins had subtly been working on him, and Bill had as well. It wasn't lost on the Weasley patriarch that of all his former circle, Harry was closest to Fred and George....indeed closer to them really than he had been at school. Dumbledore stepped into the silence.

"I agree with Arthur.....on most of what he said anyway. Now is there anything else that needs to be discussed?" There was a collective shaking of heads, and the meeting soon broke up. Bill had people to meet, so he flooed off immediately, but the twins lingered. They walked up to their father, and in turn, gave him a hug. Arthur had rarely been so shocked, though Molly had a proud smile on her face.

"Thanks dad, we're proud of you.....and Harry will be too."

"Just make sure he gets to the Ministry on time boys."

"We will, we're both coming with him." This actually made Arthur feel better, he knew the twins could ultimately be counted on in a crisis.....though he fervently hoped one wasn't looming on Monday.

Sunday, September 28, 1996

1:00 pm (Eastern Time, 7:00 pm London Time)

It had been a quiet weekend on the whole for Harry, with the gathering storm coming Monday for him. Saturday had been a rare moment of cooperation in Quidditch, as John Geyser arranged a

scrimmage with Shawnee, whose own practice time abutted Cortez'. The two teams weren't scheduled to play until the final match in June (Cortez was playing Proctor in the first half of the doubleheader on October 12, with Shawnee taking on Jefferson immediately afterward), and both captains felt they needed something approaching game experience. The result was a combined three hour practice, which was the closest Harry had had to a game in almost a year. It was not a real game mind you, and there were lots of stoppages for strategy discussions.....and Harry wound up getting three Snitches over the course of the scrimmage (score wasn't kept). It was a lot of fun though, and he was reminded most of why he loved playing Quidditch.

Saturday evening was spent rehearsing his trial testimony in front of his friends, and Drew as well.....his mother had been a lawyer before segueing into politics. The performance, if you will, took place in the Cortez Lounge, and by the end of it quite the crowd had gathered. The curiosity factor wasn't really because of Harry himself, but because these kids had no real experience with Wizard v. Wizard conflict, and the fact that it was one of their own involved made it that much more fascinating. He went through the story three times, perfecting his delivery of it, and by 11:00 pm he thought he had it down pretty well.

Sunday afternoon before he left through the trunk, he said his private goodbye to Sophie, and handed her something.....a mirror.

"I should be back tomorrow before dinner, but if there's a chance the trial will get done tomorrow, I want to be there to see his face when he's sentenced to Azkaban, so I might be a little later."

"Call me when you get a chance, and be careful."

"I will, and I will.....I've got a lot to come back for." They held each other close for a very long moment, and Harry went off through the floo, exiting in the shop.

This was the appointed time, so Fred was waiting for him. They went upstairs, where by prior arrangement, Peter Tyson was waiting for them. Before they got down to business, Harry pulled a shrunken box

out of his pocket, and handed it to the nearest twin.

“What’s this?”

“It’s filled with orders from my schoolmates. I did a count, there’s \$2,200 in there.” Those who knew about Dobby had asked Harry to give them a break on shipping charges (the twins put a ten percent surcharge for overseas deliveries in the catalog, which was just about their cost). Fred and George grinned, this was going to be a good pipeline.

“Guys, could you excuse Peter and I for a moment?” The twins went back downstairs to do some work filling the orders from Great Lakes. Tyson got up, and closed the door, putting a Silencing Charm on it.

“So what’s going on Harry?”

“I have a problem Peter. Last night I spent all evening rehearsing my trial testimony in front of my friends.....but each time I did it, I came across one part of the story I couldn’t tell them.” The proverbial light bulb went off in Peter’s head.

“Bellatrix Lestrange.”

“Right in one. I have no doubt at all that she’s told her snotty sister all about it, and that it will come up tomorrow. I need to be able to deny it convincingly, even under Veritaserum.” It was unclear whether the witnesses would be put under the drug, but he had to plan as if he would be.

“Who else on the Light side knows about this Harry?”

“Nobody Peter, otherwise I wouldn’t have sent the twins out of the room. I haven’t even told Sophie about it.”

“You want me to Obliviate you, don’t you?”

“If you have a better idea of what to do, I’m all ears.” Peter didn’t have a better idea really.....but he was very uncomfortable with what he was about to do. He liked Harry a lot, and sympathized greatly with what he had been through.....this was a slippery slope though.

“You could always refuse to testify, there’s no reason anyone even needs to know you were here tonight. The testimony of your friends should be enough to convict Malfoy and the rest.” Harry had thought about that, but ultimately it wouldn’t work.

“That would be fine if I had decided to do it that way a month ago, but I didn’t. I’ve told Bones to her face that I would testify. You and I screwed that oath document out of her and Fudge (and Rufus) on the promise I would be here. Add to that the fact that I would be skewered in the Daily Prophet if I ducked out at the last minutes, and for once they’d be right. This is the only play I have Peter, and if you don’t do it, then I’ll have to get Bill.” Peter didn’t want that, the fewer people who knew about it, the better.

“Okay Harry, I’ll do it.....this one time, and one time only. You come to me with a scheme like this again, I’ll present you with a pensieve memory of this to tell you why I won’t do it. Agreed?” Harry didn’t hesitate.

“Agreed.”

“Okay, put the memory in the front of your mind.” Peter was not a professional Obliviator, but knew enough to excise this one small memory, especially from someone whose mind was helping in the process (which made it much, much easier to do). Within a couple of minutes, the job was done.

“Harry, have you ever performed the Cruciatus Curse?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Peter immediately Obliviated the question as well, and acknowledged a job well done.

“Are you ready for tomorrow Harry?”

“I am Peter, will you be there?”

“I will, I wouldn't miss this for the world.” Soon afterward he left to go home, and Harry and the twins played cards and shot the shit for most of the rest of the evening. Right before the twins went to bed, they had something to show Harry. They brought out a box of what looked like blue racquetballs.

“Are these what I think they are?”

“Yes they are, and be very, very careful with them. They're loaded with about seven different charms, but they do work. Fred, if you will.”

Fred took one of the balls, and took aim at it with his wand:

Rictusempra!

He handed the ball to Harry, and after about five seconds, Harry was hit with the tickling hex.....while the ball vanished in front of him. The twins let him twitch for a moment, before reversing it.

“Oh this is good, this is very, very good. Will it work with the spell I need to use for the Map?”

“It should, though it won't work for all spells. Basically any spell that uses an above average amount of power won't work. I doubt these will make a huge difference in a battle for instance, but they will do very well in terms of surprise. Let's face it though, these are pranks first and foremost. All we need is a name to call them, and they can be on the shelves a few days afterward. Don't let your schoolmates know until you have the Map finished though.”

“I won't, and thanks guys. We're now up to half of it completed, and most of the rest of what we need are individual dorm rooms.”

“You still have the old one?”

“Yeah, I have it with me. I'm ready to give it to one of them, if things have cooled down. Who knows really, a lot depends on Ron.”

“There’s always trouble when that’s your mantra.” The twins went to bed a few minutes later, after assuring Harry they’d get him up on time for the trial.

Harry wound up going to bed around 1:00 am, because of the time difference (he had gotten up extra early at GL to help compensate). He gave a short prayer that the next day would go smoothly, for everyone.

End Chapter

Author's Note: See, I can update more often than every five months. I made more than a couple small screw-ups in the last chapter, believe it or not I did proofread it, not that it showed. I won't detail each one of them, we'd run into Christmas, but I am sorry. I got an interesting review that asked nicely if I'd cut down on the parentheticals, and I would love to, except that that's how I happen to think, and it seems, write.....much like my run-on sentence habit, which has gotten a little better over the months.....but not much, I admit. One more thing: I tend to do a lot of foreshadowing in my writing, but some of it in this story are blind alleys I'm using to keep you off balance a bit. Bear that in mind when you read certain scenes, both in this chapter and in the future.

Monday, September 30, 1996 (a certain muggle fanfic writer's birthday)

8:00 am

Ministry of Magic, Courtroom Orion

Harry and the twins made a point of getting there early, hoping that the Hogwarts contingent would be there as well, leaving Lee in charge of the shop (which was pretty dead on Mondays anyway). They had little trouble entering, and surprisingly were allowed to keep their wands, once it was verified who they were. The desk person explained that the rules were being relaxed for those with Ministry family members, and other special cases (such as Harry). They stopped by Arthur's office, only to find out that he was off on a "flying carpet" emergency, though he was expected back for the trial.....which was good, given that he was a witness, as a participant in the events in question. They had a friendly minute with Perkins, the Warlock who assisted Arthur, before taking their leave.

The three of them walked downstairs to the new courtroom, unofficially known as Courtroom Orion.....after Orion Gatsby, the Welsh Wizard who had designed it earlier in the year. It was quite large, twice the size of the room where Harry had his trial travesty 13 months before. The full Wizengamot would collectively sit on the east wall, with Fudge, Amos Diggory, and Percy sitting on the north side of the room, the witness chair being directly in front of them. The west

side consisted pretty much of just the two entrances: one entrance from the rest of the Ministry.....the one Harry, Fred, and George took, and the other entrance led to the holding cells of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, where Lucius Malfoy (spelled it right this week) and his ten brethren had spent a slightly comfortable night.....comfort being relative, as opposed to their last three months in Azkaban. The south side of the room consisted of the gallery, and could hold roughly 200 people, who sat directly behind the defendant. Also against the south wall was a station for the Wizing Wireless Network (WWN), which was broadcasting the trial live to all the wizard homes in Great Britain (the Wizard Irish could also pick up the signal, as could some in France).

Harry and friends were the first witnesses/spectators to arrive, though two Aurors were on station inside the doors. They weren't ones Harry was familiar with, but he greeted them amicably all the same, and they him. After doing so, he turned to see Fred.....yes he could tell them apart and always had been able to, though it was a secret he was unwilling to share with Ron or Ginny at any price or favor.....Fred was sitting in Fudge's chair, doing quite a realistic impression of the man, but being completely silent while doing so.....pantomiming I believe it's called. Harry turned back to the Aurors only to find them covering their mouths in equally silent laughter.

"Life is always interesting with you two, I'll grant you that."

"You'd be lost without us Harry, and you know it." He did know that, and nodded in agreement. Thankfully, Fred removed himself from Fudge's throne, because seconds later, in came the Hogwarts' group. They consisted of Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Hagrid, Remus, Flitwick, and McGonagall. Dumbledore presumably would be coming in with the rest of the Wizengamot. The students were all smiling at them, even Ron, but the four 'adults' all looked a bit stiff and uncomfortable. Harry took one look at the four teachers standing there and couldn't resist a shot across the bow:

"Crikey, isn't anyone minding the store back there?" McGonagall's lips got even tighter, if that's possible, though it made Flitwick and

Remus relax a little bit. Remus approached the twins and Harry, and shook hands.

“Classes are cancelled for the day, since there are so many of us here. Professor Sprout is in charge until we get back. Good to see you so well Harry.” Harry gave Remus the once-over, and noted how healthy the older man was looking.

“Same to you Remus, teaching agrees with you it seems.” The twins were off talking to the kids, much to the disapproval of McGonagall. Harry saw this, and decided to torment her a little.

“Well hello there Minerva, how have you been?” Everyone froze at Harry’s use of her first name, and the teenagers goggled at the bright smile on his face as he did so. To her credit, she didn’t rise to the bait.

“Mr. Potter.” Said in a neutral voice, but one that promised a lot more that wanted to be spoken. Harry looked around and saw that more spectators were starting to file in. He blandly turned his back on his former teacher, and looked at his friends.

“C’mon you guys, we need to talk.” The eight of them went to a corner of the gallery, and Harry and George put up Silencing Charms all around them, so that they could talk without the audience hearing what they said. Keeping a weather eye on the Hogwarts’ faculty, Harry addressed Ron and Neville:

“Okay you two, where do things stand? Have you snogged and made up yet? Please tell me yes, so that we can just chat the rest of the time.” Neither of them said a word, though Ron had a mutinous look starting to appear on his face. Neville didn’t quite have a Luna look on his face, but was so much calmer in demeanor than Harry had ever seen him. Luna’s stock went up another ten points in Harry’s mind.

“I guess not. Have we at least had a cessation in hostilities?” Both of the boys nodded.

“Now Hermione has asked me to play peacemaker with you two, not feeling up to the job herself (Hermione flinched at that). Ron, The Marauder’s Map belongs to the twins and I, and only to us until we give it to somebody else. It’s our legacy to Hogwarts, and is no one’s right unless we say so.....are we clear?” The three owners stared hard at him, until Ron gave a small jerk of his head in acknowledgment.

“Neville, whether Ron deserved being nailed in the teeth is neither here nor there. You can’t have violence between you guys, at least not for something like that. Draco must have danced a jig when he heard about it, and that’s something we have to avoid at all costs. If Ron does something like that again, just prank him, or something benign like that. At most, you can tell his mother on him. Got it?”

“Got it.” This was too easy, Harry thought suspiciously.

“Now for the love of Merlin shake hands, you can skip the snogging this time.” Neville reached his hand out, and Ron briefly shook it.....though the look on his face didn’t exactly exude sincerity.

“Good, now pranks can travel overseas you know, and Dobby and Winky would have no problem popping in on you from time to time if I want them to. Don’t test me.” This might have gone just a tad too far, and Ron couldn’t take it any more.

“How is this any of your bloody business! You ditched us the first chance you got! You said yourself that you don’t care what You Know Who does! He could kill us all and you wouldn’t give a damn.” None of the four Hogwarts kids looked shocked at hearing this, giving Harry and the twins the idea that they’d heard this kind of thing before. Both twins closed their eyes in anticipation of Harry having a nutty, but he wound up disappointing them. He walked over to Ron and pulled him close, using his robes as handles.....quite a sight when you consider that Ron had a good six inches on Harry.

“It’s my bloody business because your girlfriend is making it so.....and because I care about her feelings, I’m acquiescing. All of you matter to me Ron, though perhaps a little more than I matter to

you, you nutbar! I checked out for my own safety and sanity, and because the old man is willing to sacrifice me to kill Voldemort.....but I don't especially want to be sacrificed. Now whatever problem you have with me leaving, get over it. I never wanted your feelings to be hurt Ron, but I've been a shite sight more loyal to you than you to me over the years, I believe I deserve a little forbearance."

Ron didn't know what forbearance meant precisely, but he could guess from the looks on the others' faces. Luna and Neville had neutral expressions on their faces, while Hermione still looked troubled. His family is what brought him up short though: Ginny simply looked smug, while nodding in agreement with what Harry was saying.....but the threatening looks on the twins faces really threw him. He hadn't really caught on to just how close those three had become. Plus, the look on Harry's face unsettled him greatly. It was now dawning on him just how dangerous his erstwhile best friend had become. Ron sighed in frustration, he hated being cornered like this.

"You really believe Dumbledore would sacrifice you?" Harry saw the opportunity and pounced.

"In a heartbeat Ron, and he wouldn't think twice. I'm just a tool to him, and easily disposable to boot. That's why I left. Not because I don't love you guys, or because I'm afraid of Voldemort. It's because if I'm to face Voldemort, and I agree that its inevitable.....well I need more training and preparation that I've been getting. I've had one month of school over there, and I've learned more in that month than in any YEAR at Hogwarts. You know why? Because of no Snape, no incompetent Defense teachers, and an environment that helps me learn. Hell, if any of you want to join me over there, I'll pay the fees." Ginny is the only one who really perked up at hearing that, and Harry figured on an interrogation in the near future. Ron looked less hostile than he had been, which Harry supposed was a start.

"Now I don't expect you to like HOW I left Ron, and I agree that in a perfect world you'd have known the whole plan before the fireworks started.....but I had good reasons to do it how I did, and as far as I'm concerned, the result is what matters most here.....and the result

is, my escape went off without a hitch.” Harry’s shallow to begin with reservoir of patience was draining with every word, but Ron let it be for the time being.

The meeting ended a few seconds later with the arrival of Molly and Bill, with Arthur hurrying in a few seconds later. Harry, well aware of the impression he’d made the last time he saw the Weasley parents (in the Dursley living room), made the first move. He went over and hugged Molly, and shook Arthur’s hand. They chitchatted for a few minutes as more people came into the room, and Arthur and Molly made it clear that there were no grudges. Hermione dragged Ron over to the group and peppered Harry with questions about his Wandless Magic class. This went on for a bit, until Remus couldn’t take any more, and he excused himself and Harry from the group, who dispersed to take their seats.

“ Peter Pettigrew, Aide-to-Camp, Lord Voldemort. That was a fascinating little piece of paper Harry.....what about the rest of it?” Harry had sent parents’ friend one letter since his meeting with Mark Frankel, and had not addressed the Wormtail issue.

“I can’t tell you much Remus, an agent for the American Wizard government intercepted it and showed it to me to verify.” To say that that little statement stretched the truth to it’s limits.....

“What did the rest of it say Harry?”

“They’re recruiting in America, that’s all I know. The Aurors over there are on it Remus, they’ll handle it.” Remus started laughing.

“Did you just make up that story Harry? I would have thought I deserve a better class of lie than that.” Harry just gave him a placid smile in return.

“ Believe it or not Remus, I am capable of accepting orders.....particularly when I trust their impartiality. I was asked not to divulge any more than that, and believe or not, I’m a man of my word.”

“I swore an oath to you Harry, I swore that I would support you over him. I’ve stood up to him on your behalf at Order meetings, you know this, since the twins tell you everything that goes on there.” This had a justifiably bitter tinge to it.

“Something you should have done 15 years ago Remus, when your best friends were murdered and their son orphaned. You let him put me with those muggles without so much as a by your leave. Don’t expect any sympathy about being kept out of the loop.....and while I’m glad of your very, very recent turnaround, you still have some penance to pay. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to say hello to someone.” Harry didn’t even bring out his biggest gun: That Remus had only sworn such an oath on the promise of a million galleons and a large house, he felt he would save that for the next attempted guilt trip. Feeling a lot better having gotten that off his chest, he disengaged himself from a thoroughly unsatisfied (and hurt) Remus, and walked over to Rufus Scrimgeour, who had just entered the room.

“Hello Harry, it’s about time we met.”

“I agree sir. I bring greetings from Tom Ripley and Dick Greenleaf, they said to say hello.”

“Return them for me, thank you. How’s your Defense learning going? I imagine you’re picking up more than Hogwarts gave you.” He was eyeing Remus when he said this, but Harry didn’t necessarily disagree.

“I am, Professor Ripley is very good, very thorough. Not having to worry if he’s going to kill me is a plus.” They shared a rueful smile.

“No doubt. I’ll be over to the States for a meeting in a few weeks, I’ll stop by and we can chat some.”

“I’d like that sir.” They shook hands, and Harry went over to the seat in the second row that the twins were saving for him, the Wizengamot was filing in.....and a certain older wizard had noticed Harry and Rufus talking, not liking it. The courtroom was now almost full, as fifteen Aurors took their places around the room. Draco and his

mother sat in the first row, directly behind the defendant's chair. The Hogwarts group was in the third row on the left. All that remained to enter was Fudge and his retinue, and the defendant. The Minister walked in a few minutes later, Diggory and Percy obediently following behind him. They took their places, and Fudge put a Sonorus Charm on to quiet the room.

"Let us have quiet now!" The room went silent, as they waited for the show to begin.

"Bring in the defendant!" A minute later, Lucius Malfoy was brought in. He was dressed in his finest robes, and somehow had that albino white hair of his looking normal.....but he was not looking too good otherwise. Harry hadn't technically seen him in a few years, but it certainly looked like he had lost about 30 pounds. He was walking very slowly, but that could be attributed to his having a thick chain connecting ankle-cuffs. Two Aurors marched in front of him, and two behind, making him look much more dangerous than he perhaps was. He was placed in the defendant's chair, and magical ropes wrapped around him automatically.

The one peculiar thing Harry noted, was the expression on Fudge's face, for some reason he was drawn to it. Based on their conversation in July, Harry had expected a look of satisfaction, or at the very least one of pleasure.....he didn't see either of those or anything like them. If anything, the Minister looked nervous. He pretty much avoided eye contact with Lucius, and was looking around the room, as if noting where Dumbledore, Rufus, and even Harry himself were stationed. Harry very subtly eyed those around him, wondering if anyone else was noticing this, but it didn't seem to be the case. Harry had assumed for months that these would be the easiest convictions since Snape, given the preponderance of the evidence, but now he was wondering.

Bones stood up from her position next to the Wizengamot, and indicated to Fudge that she was ready.

"The Ministry of Magic versus Lucius Malfoy. The defendant is charged with murder, attempted murder, breaking and entering,

illegal use of Dark Magic, use of Unforgivable Curses, and being a Death Eater. Lucius Malfoy, how do you plead?”

“Not Guilty.” Malfoy’s voice was very hollow, but he managed to stand up straight and deliver it with a degree of his former arrogant bearing.

“Madam Bones, are you ready with your first witness?”

“I am. The DMLE calls Harry Potter.” Harry in fact had been the first person that most of the peanut gallery had been looking for when they came into the room, so the calling of his name didn’t create as much buzz as one might think. He walked up to the witness chair and sat down. Lucius appeared to be representing himself, and to Harry’s moderate surprise, didn’t ask him to take Veritaserum.....though Harry of course didn’t remember why that had been so important.

“Please state your name, age, and current place of residence for the record please.”

“Harry James Potter, 16, Great Lakes Magical Institute.”

“And though 16, you are an emancipated minor, is that correct?”

“Yes ma’am, though to be accurate, I wasn’t on the day in question.”

“Duly noted. Mr. Potter, when did you first meet the defendant?” Harry had to consider that for a second.

“I couldn’t tell you the exact date ma’am, but it was in August, 1992, at Flourish and Blotts.”

“What happened at that meeting?” Harry proceeded to describe the events that transpired at the Lockhart book signing. A lot of people looked at Arthur, the idea of him getting into a fight was rather shocking.

In turn, Harry was asked to describe his other meetings with Lucius: At the end of second year, both in Dumbledore's office and in the corridor right outside it; the scene right after the Tri-Wizard, in the graveyard; and finally, he spent 20 minutes describing in detail his memory of the battle at The Department of Mysteries.

"You are stating for the record that the defendant is a Death Eater and acknowledged as much in front of you?"

"Yes I am, though I would bet that he'll claim to be under Imperius."

"I tender the witness to the defense, though I reserve the right to recall."

Lucius eyed his son's rival, but any sense of menace he might have exuded was tempered by his being chained up. He could never look at Harry without being reminded of Dobby attacking him, but he tamped it down.

"Potter.....you hate me, do you not?"

"Yes I do." Expecting a rant, Malfoy was caught short a bit, but he rallied.

"Why?" Harry thought this would be obvious after 30 minutes of talking about Malfoy and his evils.

"Well, trying to kill me will tend to bring that feeling out in me Lucius, I'm not sure what you expected." The crowd tittered, and even Dumbledore smiled at hearing that.

"And you hate my son, do you not?" A stickier wicket really.

"Eh, not really." Say what? Lucius again recovered quickly.

"Is that so?"

“It’s hard to hate someone who fails to best you time and time again. I certainly don’t like him, but given that this is the last time I’ll have to see his snide features for a few years, I have no hate for him.” Yes, Harry had been rehearsing that speech. Bones had given him a few tips on what questions he should expect, and this was one of them. The crowd liked it too, though if Harry had turned around he would have noticed Fudge grimacing.

“Surely you cannot expect the court members to overlook your bias toward my family? You hate us, and want me in prison because of it!” Harry knew that he had to remain calm and controlled here.

“I want you in prison for your crimes Lucius, nothing more, nothing less. If not for you being a Death Eater, I would hardly know you. Meanwhile your son is merely an irritant to me, hardly worth sending you to prison just for that.”

“Isn’t it true that you yourself committed a series of crimes on the night I was falsely arrested? Breaking into the Ministry? Violating the bounds of the Department of Mysteries? Use of underage magic?”

“All true but the last, an underage wizard or witch is allowed to use magic to defend themselves.....as you well know.”

“Why were you not charged for your crimes do you think?”

“Because my crimes, as you call them, resulted in the capture of 11 Death Eaters and the official exposure of Voldemort’s return. I’m guessing that they felt the benefit was worth the cost.”

“Because you are the so-called Boy Who Lived?”

“I’m sure that was part of it.” Though Harry seemed to be handling this fine, Bones stood up.

“The DMLE would like to state for the record that Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood, and Mr. Longbottom have been granted immunity for their transgressions in

exchange for their testimony today, and that all six of them expressed their desire to testify before immunity was brought up by us.” Technically she was right, in very broad strokes. The five Hogwarts kids had indeed assumed that since charging them had never even been mentioned in the three months since the incident, that none were coming. Bones decided that Harry’s worrisome (to her anyway) paranoia need not be brought out into the open.

“The record will so acknowledge.”

Lucius did not, as expected, tender the witness. Instead he went over Harry’s previous testimony about their incidents, picking at them for perceived bias and inconsistencies. Lucius may have been arrogant and conceited, but Harry had to allow that he knew what he was doing. Bones looked bored shitless, but at no point had any cause to object. It took another 30 minutes, but Harry was finally off the witness stand at about 10:15 am, though Lucius too reserved the right to recall him. He made sure his back was turned to the Wizengamot and made an exaggerated wink at Draco.....who, surprisingly, simply smirked in return.

Hermione was next, followed by Ginny and Luna. Their stories pretty well matched Harry’s, since the first two girls had never met Lucius other than when Harry did. Surprisingly Luna had met him a couple of times with her dad, but they were nothing of consequence. Still, Malfoy’s cross examining kept the three of them on the stand for over an hour total, and Harry was brought up more than once. Bones, wondering why Malfoy was stalling so much, rose to her feet after Luna stepped down.

“The DMLE will stipulate that the testimony of Ronald Weasley and Neville Longbottom will not deviate substantially from that of Miss Granger or Miss Weasley, if the defendant will agree to forgo cross examination.” Malfoy did not even wait for Fudge to say anything.

“I will not stipulate to their testimony, and I will not forgo my rights under the law.”

“Very well, Madam Bones, call your next witness.” Bones shot Malfoy a look of irritation as she called Neville to the stand. Malfoy limited himself to a sneer in return.

Neville, after an uneventful (and rather hurried) examination by Bones, was, unfortunately, forced to answer many a Malfoy question about his parents and their condition, whereupon Bones finally had had enough and started a string of objections. Fudge announced to a restless crowd that a lunch break would be granted after Ron was done. Bones wrapped Ron in five minutes, and Malfoy was shockingly easy on him, nailing him only at the end.

“Mr. Weasley, what was your reaction when you heard that Potter had decamped for America?” This was a bit tricky, since Ron had heard the news in two separate parts: the first when he was told Harry had left Britain, the second when he found out specifically where. Ron, though a bit dim in most other respects, smelled a trap nonetheless.

“I was surprised.”

“Hurt perhaps?” Dim though he was, Ron didn’t like words being put in his mouth.

“How is that your business?” Beating Bones to it, as she was rising again to object the same.

“We are again discussing Potter’s honesty and trustworthiness. Is it true that you, his best friend, were not told about his move until after the fact?” Ron and the others had undergone a strict lecture from Remus and McGonagall before the trial about the Order and its secrets (the old man was still shunning them).....so while Ron, in theory, may have understood Harry’s reasons for leaving him in the dark.....he couldn’t explain them in open court. He wasn’t about to lie for Harry though, not anymore. Keeping his voice level:

“Yes, that is true.” Now there was a buzz in the courtroom, as eyes turned to Harry.....who had prepared his amiably smiling facial expression from the instant Malfoy asked the question. Ron smiled

right back at him the same way, with the twins on either side of Harry fervently hoping that Ron had taken his pound of flesh and was done.

“I have no further use of this witness.” It was now a minute past noon.

“We will now break for lunch, everyone be back here at 1:30 pm.” Aurors led Lucius back to his holding area, and the gallery slowly filed out. Fred, George, and Harry just stood there waiting for Ron to come down. Molly and Arthur came up as well, hoping to avert a scene, with the Hogwarts crew waiting by the door with Bill, watching.

“Are we square now Ron?” Ron’s smile was now gone, replaced by a look of indignation.

“What was I supposed to say? It was the truth wasn’t it?” Harry just shook his head sadly, true or not, it had been done to damage him.

“Yes it was, you helped Lucius just enough. Thanks Ron. Oh yeah, if I find out you were the Witch Weekly source about Sophie.....” He left the threat understood but unspoken, turned and walked toward the door. Hermione stopped him before he could leave.

“What did you mean by that? Helping Malfoy?” Clearly she hadn’t seen as many courtroom movies as he had (Claudia had gotten him hooked on them, as she loved them too).

“ He’s setting me up for something Hermione, every cross examination dealt with me. He’s using past doubts about me to try and make me the villain. He knows he’ll have trouble getting the Wizengamot to acquit him, so he’s scoring points against me for the future.” This gave her pause, and time for the twins to catch up to Harry. Ginny grabbed his arm.

“You’re not leaving are you? Don’t let Ron drive you away.” Harry wasn’t going back to school, not yet. He hadn’t listened to Malfoy impugn him for over two hours for nothing. He wanted to hear the guilty verdict.

“I’m not leaving the country yet, if that’s what you’re asking. Heck, breakfast hasn’t even started back home (he emphasized the word home, and stared right at McGonagall and Remus while doing so). Gred and Forge and I are going to meet someone for lunch in muggle London, seeing as how we have so long a break.” The someone was Peter Tyson, who had quietly slipped out of the courtroom unnoticed by the others.....the main subjects being WWW and the trial (of course). Bill sidled up to them.

“I’m going to tag along too, if these guys don’t mind. I’m not sure I trust three guys as vague as this lot out and about in London by themselves.” Fred and George exchanged looks of mock affront, and quickly whipped out their wands and pointed them at Bill.....and the look on his face.....

“Oh that was good Fred, we need to do that more often.” The others were rather surprised as well.

“Right you are George. As you folks saw, we’ve been practicing the Potter Quick Draw. The only decent Defense teacher we ever had.” They walked out the door, still cackling as they pocketed their wands. Molly and Arthur said they would stay with the Hogwarts group, since they rarely got to see their youngest children during the school year. With McGonagall and Remus glaring at him, Harry didn’t even bother to ask if any of the other teenagers would be allowed to join them. He and Bill took off after the twins, and therefore missed a bit of fun. Ginny turned to her big brother and cracked him across the face, causing Molly to gasp.

“You snotty little bastard. What the hell did you think you were doing? No wonder Harry took off, having to put up with you all the time.” Ron had had enough from more than just Harry this day.

“You ever do that again Ginny, you’ll regret it.” Ginny looked like she was about to take him up on his threat, when cooler heads prevailed. Arthur stepped between them.

“Enough, both of you. The next one to misbehave is the one who will regret it, and I’m talking about more than just a de-gnoming. Am I

understood?" For the second time in four hours, Ron agreed to a truce that he didn't really mean. He nodded his head, while Ginny just turned and stalked away, Luna and Neville following her. Ron's parents and Hermione didn't say anything to him, as the Hogwarts' faculty wisely stayed silent.

"Don't look at me like that, I haven't done anything wrong!" That was debatable, but the other chose to let it lie.

"Let's go guys, we can floo to the Leaky Cauldron from my office and have some lunch. Minerva?"

"Yes, let us do that. Mr. Weasley (addressing Ron), I do not want to hear of any incidents involving you and your sister, am I understood?"

"If she smacks me again, she's getting hit back.....hard. You can give me detentions from here to Christmas, I don't care." He walked away, but Hermione for once did not follow him.

"Hermione, please talk to him."

"I'll try Mrs. Weasley.....but I won't try much more. He's changed, and I don't like those changes." She hurried after Ginny, quietly talking to her as they went. Remus had a surprising comment.

"Well in this one small instance I'm with Ron.....if someone hits me, they're getting hit back, woman or not. I thought your blasé reaction to that was inappropriate Minerva. Come on, let's get to lunch." McGonagall colored at the criticism, as she did at all criticism not given by Dumbledore. The rest of the trial break went peacefully though. Ron sulked throughout the meal, but the others just ignored it and chatted amongst themselves.

The meal break for Harry and his group was even more relaxing. WWW covered most of it, as Fred and George talked about their plans to lease some space next to Madam Rosmerta's during the next Hogsmeade visit (to take place in less than three weeks, concurrent with one of the Great Lakes' Flackter Alley weekends). Expansion was also brought up, but they were in no hurry to put

down roots in another store until the Voldemort situation was stabilized. When talk turned to the trial, Peter agreed that Lucius was up to something, and found it odd that he didn't have a lawyer with him. His theory is that Malfoy knew it was a loser, the standard "I was under Imperious" defense notwithstanding.....and was just saving money and making a point. None of them thought that Voldemort would make an appearance, they all figured that Lucius and his cronies were in disgrace and weren't worth saving. Harry recounted to them Bones' statement that she had used Veritaserum to pump them for information, but had come up empty handed. That sealed it, and they went back to talking about the shop.

Meanwhile, just inside The Forbidden Forest, one hundred meters east of Hagrid's home.

1:15 pm

The tall, gaunt figure of Fenrir Greyback surveyed his troops calmly. There were 20 of them, most of his pack as it was currently constituted (he had 10 others held back, in case things went bad here). He addressed them now.

"Remember the plan. Hogsmeade group, cause as much physical and property destruction as you possibly can, then set off the signal. Don't let the Aurors get too many shots at you when they get there.....but keep in mind that them getting there is what we are after. Kill if you must, but do not delay unnecessarily to feed. While it would be nice to have some new 'converts', that is not the focal point of the mission. Am I understood?" A collective:

"Yes sir." Edward Grant, an Irish werewolf, would be leading the Hogsmeade sortie. He was Fenrir's right-hand man, and could be trusted to do what was necessary.

"The rest of you, those that are coming with me, watch out for the Hogwarts' staff that remain. The most skilled teachers are at the trial right now, the only one we really need to worry about is Shepherd, the young one. Narcissa told me that he is skilled in Defense, no matter that he only teaches Potions. There are a number of students

who are capable though, so there is no need to get inside.” Seeing nods of understanding from his troops, he was satisfied.

“Good, Edward, take your men to Hogsmeade. Give the signal when you are ready.”

“Yes sir. This will be a good day.” Greyback gave a hard smile.

“It’s the day we get back the initiative. All we need is that arrogant Wizard (he was referring to our friend Voldemort) to do his part.” Grant and 11 others slipped through the woods, all going together. They moved quickly and stealthily through the forest, and somehow managed to avoid any Centaur patrols (or perhaps they didn’t, but no contact was made by the Centaurs either way). They exited near the Shrieking Shack, right across the railroad tracks near Hogsmeade Station. Grant checked his watch, it was 1:35. He motioned to Castor Archer, his largest soldier, to give the signal:

AAAAAAWHHHHOOOOOOOOOO!

The howl split the afternoon air, and ears all over Hogsmeade perked up when they heard it.

“You men know what to do.....attack!” The dozen of them proceeded to transform, a very difficult and draining process when there was no full moon to be had.....but they had more than enough energy left for some destruction. They grouped off in four’s.....one quartet to The Three Broomsticks.....one to Zonkos.....and the last (with Grant) to Dervish and Banges. A look at a map of Hogsmeade would tell you that these three places were rather distant from each other, giving each unit a specific territory for carnage.....and carnage is what ensued. Within ten minutes the place was half destroyed, as the first mass werewolf attack in decades descended upon the unsuspecting citizens of the village.

The first sub-pack tore apart Madam Rosemerta’s establishment in less than a minute, terrorizing the few customers inside.....all of whom were listening to the Malfoy trial on the pub’s wireless set. Castor Archer made a point to get to the floo and destroy it, so that

word could not get out quickly. In the heat of the moment, they disregarded Greyback's order about killing.....and two patrons were killed, but the rest Apparated away, including Madam Rosmerta. Archer and company moved on to the next building.....rinse, and repeat. Similar scenes happened with the other two groups, as there would be a need for nine gravestones for citizens of Hogsmeade. After about eight minutes, all of the living residents had Apparated away.....those with children had used camouflaged floor fireplaces for emergencies just like this. That left Grant and his troops only a few more minutes for destruction, and the werewolves used them well.

At that point, they heard the howl in the distance.....the retreat signal, this was concurrent with the arrival of the Aurors, who Apparated in near the Post Office, as all of the floors were now destroyed but the emergency ones. The werewolves rapidly massed back at their starting point, and disappeared into the forest, soon rendezvousing with their brethren.

Flashback ten minutes to Fenrir Greyback's position near Hagrid's hut.

"There's the signal, let's go." Greyback only had seven others with him, because he didn't anticipate much human resistance. After they made the change, they tore apart Hagrid's home first (Grawp was in parts unknown, and they did not come across him). Perversely, they let Fang live for some reason, and simply ignored him as they went about their home redesign. Once done, they advanced on the castle.....and some expected company.

Their inside man, a rather small white haired boy in Slytherin, had told them that flying lessons were not to be canceled this day. Madam Hooch and ten Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw first year students were outside for flying lesson number three. These were the kids who hadn't quite gotten the idea during the first two lessons earlier in the month, and almost all of them were muggleborns. They were on the ground when the noise from Hagrid's hut.....sorry, his former hut.....reached their ears. The kids didn't know what was going on, but Hooch was in the know about Grawp, and just assumed it was him doing some redecorating.

They found out soon enough, as Greyback led his cohorts straight up the path towards them.

“Everyone into the air, now!” These were muggleborn kids remember, and ironically, pretty much all of them had seen werewolves on television, or in the movies.....and these looked pretty representative. They all got on their brooms with a few seconds to spare, and got into the air.....doing that wasn't their problem, their reason for being here a third time (Neville had needed a third time as well), it was what to do once they did. Hooch barely got into the air before Fenrir reached her. She screamed at her charges:

“Go up to Astronomy Tower!” The kids still didn't fully appreciate what was going on, but Hooch had instructed them the first day that they should do whatever she told them.....and they obeyed.....some not very gracefully, some hesitantly.....but they all got up there, safe, in theory.

Hooch, upon seeing that, sped off toward the front doors, which were closed, but unlocked. She couldn't believe what was happening.....well she could, and that's what bothered her in the split seconds she had to think about it. She knew this couldn't be a coincidence, with the most powerful of the faculty being hundreds of kilometers away. Hooch was on a crap broom, and she may have been getting up there in years.....but she was the Flying Instructor for a very good reason, it was now a race to the doors.

Two of the werewolves had tried to head her off by going right for the doors, rather than the kids, but she got there just in time, using her wand to open them as she skidded through, almost hitting the ground. She whipped her wand back at the one open door, closing it just as the two werewolves crashed into it.

Compingo!

A basic locking spell, but one that would suffice against someone without magic.....at least for the time being. In order for the doors to become magically enhanced, the castle would have to be put into lockdown.....and that could only be done by Dumbledore,

McGonagall, or Flitwick.....and tellingly, the last time they had all been out of the castle at the same time (during the school year) was many years ago, one time.....when Flitwick was over in The United States, and Murray was there. Hooch took a second to pull herself together, and raised her wand to her throat

Magis Sonorous!

THE SCHOOL IS UNDER ATTACK! WEREWOLVES HAVE ENTERED THE GROUNDS, EVERYONE TO YOUR COMMON ROOMS.....NOW!

Magis Sonorus is basically Sonorous multiplied by ten, and made her voice capable of reaching the entire castle. Classes may have been cancelled, but they were replaced by mandatory study halls, so none of the students were outside goofing off. She could still hear werewolves battering at the doors.....but did not realize that there were only five of them.....Greyback and two others were ransacking the Herbology greenhouses.....where, thankfully, Sprout was not at the moment.

POMONA! SOUND THE ALARM!

The alarm in question, located in every staff office as well as the Great Hall, was connected directly to the Ministry, and needed only the wand of any teachers to activate it. The alarm had not been used since the time of Grindewald, but everyone was briefed on it every September. Seconds later it sounded, which coincided with Shepherd and Hill, who had been chatting in Hill's office, racing toward her. The alarm was much like a muggle fire alarm, and was very, very loud.

WHOOOP WHOOOP WHOOOP WHOOOP WHOOOP!

It sounded both at Hogwarts, and in The Ministry.....where our main players were just settling back in, as Remus had just been called by Bones to the witness chair.

The Ministry of Magic

2 Minutes earlier:

The crowd had been filing back in for the last 10 minutes, as Harry, Fred, and George managed to get their preferred seats back. The assumed order of witnesses were the Order members who had fought, though whether Dumbledore would take the stand was a subject of much speculation. Remus was still in the first few questions of his testimony, dealing with his experiences at the end of the last war, when they heard the alarm.

Harry covered his ears at the noise, as did most of the other gallery. Dumbledore, belying his age, sprang up as the place went into bedlam.

“Silence! Hagrid, stay here with the kids. Minerva, Remus, Filius, with me now!” He ran out the door, followed closely by the other three. They hurried to the nearest floor, and quickly got to Dumbledore’s office.

“Remus, Filius, to the front doors. Minerva, begin checking the Common Rooms.” McGonagall, like all teachers, had the current passwords to each of the Houses. Dumbledore himself raced to Sprout’s office, praying that this was some kind of misunderstanding. He reached her office just in time, as she was about to come to his. Sprout had only remained where she was in order to brief Dumbledore when he got there.

“What happened Pomona?”

“Werewolves Albus, eight of them from what Rolanda said. It just happened, that’s all I know.”

“Did any of them breach the doors?”

“I don’t know, that’s where Rolanda is right now, and I heard Jeffrey and Charles heading down there as well.”

“Very well, Minerva is checking on the students, take the other teachers and do the same. Make sure at least two teachers are in each Common Room until the crisis passes.” She nodded and

immediately set off. After turning off the alarm, the old man hurried down to the front doors, where found the five of his faculty already there. There was no pounding on the doors any longer, though the doors themselves looked a little warped to his eyes.

“Rolanda, what happened?”

She didn’t have much more information than what Sprout had given him, since there were no windows in the front.

“What of the children?”

“There were supposed to be none outside, other than my flying students. I sent them up to Astronomy Tower, but I couldn’t see if they all got there.” True, she had been kind of busy at the time.

“Jeffrey, please go up there and see to them.”

“Yes Albus.” The Muggle Studies teacher rushed off.

“What do we do now Albus? The pounding stopped about a minute ago.” Where was Moody when you really needed him.....he had stayed behind in the courtroom.

“The Aurors will be here any second Charles, they will deal with what’s outside. Our responsibility is to the students inside. I have the other faculty checking on the Common Rooms. We will stay here and await the Aurors.” A couple of minutes passed before there was more pounding on the door.

“Ministry of Magic, open the doors!” The voice was that of Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had not been in the courtroom.....Bones not wanting to put any Aurors on the stand for Lucius to cross examine. Dumbledore breathed a sigh of relief, and he and Remus unlocked and opened the huge doors.

“Kingsley, it’s good to see you. What happened out there?”

“The werewolves are all gone, they sprinted into The Forbidden Forest as soon as we came in. We didn’t see how many.....but there is smoke on the horizon Albus, from the direction of Hogsmeade.” This should not have been surprising, given the number of werewolves who had attacked, but Dumbledore didn’t really have a good idea of the size of Greyback’s pack.

“Oh dear. You sent people over there?”

“We did, Tonks is leading them. Have all of your students been accounted for?”

“We are efforting that as we speak. Did you find anyone out there?”

“No, no bodies. You will need new Herbology greenhouses, and Hagrid will be sleeping in the castle tonight though.”

“Was it Greyback?”

“I don’t know Albus, we didn’t see any specific faces. They never tried to engage us, or even to throw any taunts.” Kingsley had three Aurors with him now, and five more had been sent to Hogsmeade. One of those Aurors (Monica Evans) came running from the front gate, where she had Apparated in.....one could not Apparate on the Hogwarts’ grounds either. Out of breath after the quarter mile sprint, she gasped out her report.

“The whole village has been leveled Kingsley, Headmaster.”

“Werewolves?”

“We think so, but there’s nobody left to ask. They’re either dead or they popped away. The damage did not look like it was magically done though.”

“How many dead Monica?”

“I don’t know Headmaster, I came back here after we found the first two in The Three Broomsticks. The others are searching the rest of the wreckage. The only buildings still standing are The Post Office and The Shrieking Shack, the rest are in pieces.” Fifteen minutes had now passed since the alarms had gone off, and Dumbledore was already tired because of the day’s events. Something was bothering him though, like a splinter in his mind. He walked a few steps outside, and saw the smoke Kingsley had referred to. McGonagall came hurrying up as he was thinking.

“All the students are accounted for Albus, outside of those six at the trial (Draco as well remember). They’re all in their Common Rooms, and they’re worried.” That was good, a worried student wouldn’t do anything rash, and the only truly rash students were at the trial.

The trial.....finally, it clicked.

“Kingsley, how many Aurors do you have here and in Hogsmeade?”

“Nine sir, including me.....add to that you, Remus, and Filius, we could beat the werewolves back if they return.”

“How many are back at The Ministry?”

“Around 50 throughout the building, plus 10 more at Azkaban, and 10 more who work nights and are off duty right now. That’s the entire Auror cadre.”

“Filius, Remus, come with me. Kingsley, get most of your people back to The Ministry. Minerva, put the castle in lockdown as soon as we have left.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have a feeling that this was just a diversion. Go, now.” The teachers hurried after Dumbledore, and Kingsley directed a few instructions to Monica Evans before following them with the other three Aurors. The seven of them got to Dumbledore’s office and flooded into back to the office they had used before.....and it was

unfortunate that Dumbledore had his light bulb moment when he did, because they came directly into an inferno.

Flashback to The Ministry

Harry watched the Hogwarts faculty stream out with a growing sense of unease. He knew what those alarms meant, and his 'who's minding the store' comment from this morning took on extra portent. He looked up at Fudge, who had now stood up and was waving for attention.

"Calm down everyone, calm down! The trial is temporarily recessed, we will resume when we have word of what has happened at Hogwarts. Everyone will remain in your seats." Except Fudge of course, who came down from his perch to whisper with Percy and Amos Diggory. After a hurried minute of consultation, Fudge waddled out the door, with his henchmen taking their seats again. Lucius was still chained in his seat, and Bones wandered over to talk with Rufus, who was seated in the front row. The alarm turned off after another moment, and everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief. It couldn't have been that bad, for the alarm to only last a few minutes, right?

Harry still didn't like it though. He and the twins were quietly talking and speculating, and he slipped his wand into his hand, trying to do so without attracting any attention. He nudged Fred, and he and George did likewise. Hermione saw them do this and left her seat, over Hagrid's objections, and the three 'adults' budged over to let her sit down.

"They haven't come back yet, what do you think is going on?" Fred had once conned Quirrel's immediate predecessor into telling him how to activate the alarm.....though even he wasn't that bold to actually try it.....he just wanted it for future information (indeed he had almost used it against Umbridge, but felt that that line shouldn't be crossed in that instance). He told them the spell that needed to be used.

"You can't set it off by accident, that's the main thing, its not like one of your muggle alarms where all you have to do is trip and you might

activate it. It has to be an attack against the outer walls of some kind.” Hermione was about to ask another question when there was a crash against the outside door, the one that led to the rest of The Ministry. The door didn’t open, but one of the door guards went out to investigate.....and that’s when it happened.

Ten members of the Wizengamot stood up, wands in hand.....and put Death Eater masks over their faces. Each took aim at an Auror, and before anyone could blink:

AVADA KEDAVRA!

Times ten.

All ten Aurors targeted were killed, though none of them have yet been players in our story. The remaining nine (not including Rufus), five along the walls and Lucius’ guard detail reacted as fast as could be expected, and took down five of the Death Eaters before they could fire again.....but the five who dodged the return fire managed to kill four more Aurors

All this took roughly five seconds, and for the crowd, four and a half of those had been taken up by processing what was going on. Rufus strode out into the middle of the room and started taking aim at the masked men (yes, they were all men), but was distracted by the small occurrence of the main door being blown off its hinges, and more Death Eaters flowing into the room.

“Get down!” Rufus screamed at the gallery, and indeed most of them did.....even Hagrid, who had a hair bit of trouble hiding under or behind the pew. The regular Aurors were now all dead, and Rufus and Bones were going toe to toe with the new arrivals. Not all the Wizengamot members were past their prime or cowards, and curses soon filled the air, as their traitorous brethren soon bore the brunt of a hail of non-Avada Kedavra curses. One of the newly arrived Death Eaters took the time to free Lucius from his chains, and the defendant was hustled out of what remained of the door, but not before yelling:

“Not Guilty!”

In the second row, Hermione drew her wand and took aim at the horde, before Harry and George shoved her down.

“For the love of Merlin Granger, get down.” George said, as he jerked her out of the way, saving her from some sort of blue light coming straight for her. He, Fred, and Harry took aim and fired:

REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO!

Straight into the main body of the Death Eaters, who looked to be about 30 at the least. The curses all hit home, though it now drew the bad guys’ attention. Only about a dozen or so of the gallery were doing as Harry and the twins did, and the good guys were quickly losing the battle.....Avada Kedavra versus any other spell is a battle that heavily favors the killing side.

“Mates, follow my lead.” Harry aimed his wand at the floor in front of him and fired down:

SERPENSORTIA!

A large snake appeared out of his wand, and the twins did likewise. Harry summoned up his rusty Parseltongue.

“Attack them! Kill anyone with a mask! No mercy to Death Eaters!”

The sound of anyone speaking Parseltongue is enough to give your average wizard the quivers, but to come from The Boy Who Lived was even more frightening, and did give most of the Death Eaters who heard it a moment of pause. The snakes did their part though, and slithered toward the Death Eaters, and even managed to kill one of them before they were put down.....Avada Kedavra works on magically created snakes too, it seemed. Harry repeated his ploy, but none of the snakes even made it to the enemy this time.....but plenty of killing curses were flowing his way. He thought quickly, and decided that the familiar tricks were sometimes the best. He shouted down to the twins and Hermione, who he had given up trying to keep out of the battle.

“Fire Reducto at the ceiling, we need some cover!” More people than just those three heard him, and they all thought that more cover was a splendid notion.

This is not a good thing mind you.

Soon the entire ceiling above had collapsed under a withering hail of Reducto curses as Harry now screamed at them to stop. Fortunately no one was in the offices above.....unfortunately a lot of people in the gallery were hit with debris. Some of the more rational spectators also aimed at the south wall, and more rubble was created.....Orion Gatsby would be suicidal if he could see this.

No one was seriously injured though, and enough people pitched in to make a nice sized barrier between the gallery and most of the Death Eaters. The Wizengamot members who had been willing to fight were mostly dead, except for what looked to be about two. They had beaten Harry and company to the punch when it came to creating a barrier.....but they had used the dead bodies of the Wizengamot traitors as their physical shield.

Harry's side was starting to pin the enemy down (somewhat), when things took a turn:

KABOOOOOOM!

The west wall exploded, and the gap that was formerly the door was now many meters wide.....and the new arrivals all had masks on but one:

Voldemort

The bad man waved his hand at the door leading down to the holding cells, and it ripped off its hinges. He turned toward a shorter figure standing next to him.....one with a silver hand.

“Go get the others Wormtail, kill who you have to.” Pettigrew ran through the door, followed closely by about a dozen of the new

arrivals. The only resistance that Harry (whose scar had started tingling, but not hurting, a minute earlier) could see was coming from his side of the room.....though if he had looked in just the right place, he would have seen that the rear guard of the Death Eaters had a few things to do. His man-made wall was quickly being battered down, as the Death Eaters spread out around the room. He turned to Fred.

“Where the hell are the Aurors?” Fred knew Harry probably didn’t want to hear this, but.....

“They’re probably dead mate, and we will be soon too if we don’t do something.”

“We need more space, we’re too tightly packed in here. Do you guys know the explosion spell?” Heads were shaken.

“Abrumpere.....on the count of three, aim it at the north wall. One.....two.....three.....NOW!” The four of them rose up, and with help from behind:

ABRUMPERE!

Fudge would need a new throne, as a dozen others joined Harry, Hermione, Fred, and George in totally destroying the north wall, fortunately there was no one on the other side of it. Harry took a quick peek behind him to see who was helping him. Mostly they were adult wizards he’d never seen before, though Rufus and Bones were among them (I said mostly remember). Ginny and the others were still being held in place by Hagrid, but he saw that she was trying to break free, as were Neville, Luna, and even Ron.....no one could ever doubt his courage, no matter how idiotically he behaved. Peter Tyson, Bill, Molly, and Arthur were four rows behind them, and also had their wands out, Bill making sure his mother wasn’t in the line of fire. Interestingly, Draco and Narcissa Malfoy were still there, no longer in the front row, but making sure that they stayed well out of the firing line. Harry motioned to Rufus and Bones to make their way to the east wall (the Wizengamot wall) so that they could start to outflank the Death Eaters.....who were now numbering around 25, including Voldemort. Bones and Rufus suddenly rushed over to the

wreckage of Fudge's throne/podium, drawing some fire and emboldening other, formerly timid, members of the gallery, who began firing curses at the Death Eaters. Harry and his small group began moving toward the west wall, which was not so populated by the bad guys any longer.

They were delayed in this effort by the return of Peter Pettigrew and his men, who had the ten other captured Death Eater defendants in tow.....though Pettigrew's crew seemed a bit smaller than the one that had left minutes earlier. Said defendants were hustled out as quickly as Lucius was.....but not before Pettigrew saw Harry.

"Potter!" Harry may not have hated Draco, but he certainly hated Wormtail.....he whipped up his wand:

REPUSLAR!

This was the pulse spell Drew had taught him after the Wizard Chess Club meeting last week, and it hit Pettigrew full in the face, knocking him flat on his back.....and relieving him of most of his teeth in the bargain. Before the others could draw a bead on him, Harry gave into most of his latent anger and started running toward the Death Eaters:

REPULSAR! REDUCTO! ABRUMPERE!

This rush wasn't as suicidal as one might think from hearing about it. He blasted a path right through the middle of the Death Eaters, and cut them into two groups. Fred, George, and Hermione quickly followed suit, mostly using Reducto and Confundo, as the four of them were now in the hallway outside the courtroom.....though the room now had just one wall remaining (the Wizengamot wall on the east). Ginny and company broke free of Hagrid and started attacking.

Now the Death Eaters were taking fire from three sides: Harry and his threesome to the west of them.....Bones and Rufus on the east side, and the rest of them to the south, with Ginny and Neville in the front behind what was left of the rubble pile. The good guys still weren't using Avada Kedavra, except for Rufus and Bones, but the bad folk weren't hitting as often as they were before. Plus, something to keep in mind, one cannot simply fire of the killing curse like a gun firing off

bullets, one had to let their magical energy recharge a bit.....even Voldemort, though he was the most powerful in the room by a decent margin (keep in mind that Harry's magical power is still growing). The non-lethal curses use less energy, and the good guys were starting to gain the advantage back.

Percy and Diggory finally made appearances at this point, they had been hiding amongst the dead Wizengamot, but they joined the battle at last. Percy, who was as adept at Defense as anyone else in his family, attempted to move near his siblings.

Voldemort stood near the north side, effortlessly dodging the efforts of Bones and Rufus, rather enjoying the workout.....this was only his second battle since regaining his corporeal form (after The Department of Mysteries battle that was the point of this day to begin with). The mission could be considered a success, they had retrieved the Death Eaters they came for, and The Ministry was going to be needing some new Aurors pretty quickly. He loosed a few killing curses at Ginny and company just for the hell of it, and decided that enough was enough.

“Retreat! Back to your exits!”

Pettigrew stumbled to his feet, but his mask had been blasted off by Harry's curse.....and Ron started aiming for him.....Ron being one of the few people firing who actually recognized Pettigrew. This got Harry's attention outside the room, and as Wormtail was running away from his former owner, he let loose with a spell he'd studied hard just in case something like this arose.

SE FUNDERE!

He hit Pettigrew's silver hand dead on with the liquefying spell. It was far enough away, and done inexpertly enough, that it didn't totally melt the hand.....but it was now useless. Before Harry could do anything else to him though, he hurried off, his compatriots firing curse after curse at Harry to give him cover.

Voldemort was among the last out of the courtroom, and he saw his old friend Ginny begin to leave the (slight) safety of the rubble pile in

order to get to Bones, Rufus, and now Percy. She had her back turned to him for a moment, believing that most of the danger had passed. A thin, cruel smile alighted the bad man's face as he lazily lifted his wand:

AVADA KEDAVRA!

The spell sped right toward her, and would have hit but for one thing: Someone had seen him about to fire, and that person leapt and managed to tackle Ginny out of the way.....taking the full brunt of the killing curse right in the back. Ron and Neville lead a firestorm of curses Voldemort's way, but he put up a shield and just as lazily blocked them, satisfied that his killing curse had gotten someone. He finally left the room, striding away confidently, his bodyguards hurrying along behind him. Ron ran around the makeshift wall, with Neville and Luna close behind, and sprinted up to his sister.

Ginny lay on her back, with a now dead body lying on top of her. Ron was the first to reach her, but he already knew the identity of her savior before flipping him over.....because of the hair.

It was Percy.

"Oh God, oh my God, Percy!" This was Molly, who had witnessed the whole scene and now rushed up to her children.....well all but Fred and George, who were busy avoiding death out in the hallway area. Ron helped his sister to her feet, and then knelt by his brother, who was being cradled by his mother.

"Percy.....I'm sorry man. I'm sure you'll fit right in with Sirius, James, and Lily up there." Bill touched his shoulder, though moved by the sentiment, of which he quite agreed.

"C'mon guys, the others are still out there, we have to help them." Ron nodded, and he, Neville, Luna, and Ginny followed Bill out the door, holding down their grief for their wayward brother and friend.....though Molly wouldn't let go of him, with Arthur holding on to her from behind.

Harry, Hermione, and the twins were about 15 meters away, having been herded there by Death Eater fire. They were the first courtroom people out there, though they could hear Aurors in the distance, fighting Death Eaters that had been performing rearguard duties. Harry knew, not so deep down, that he probably should just let them leave, and not risk his friends' lives any longer....or his own for that matter. He just couldn't though, he felt he had to make this as painful a victory for them as he could.

As the next to last wave of the Death Eaters came by, he swung around his corner and charged them.

REPULSAR! REPULSAR! ABRUMPERE!

He was running somewhat low on energy, so he used the pulse spell as his primary weapon, it using relatively little magical power to fire. The twins and Hermione, not wanting Harry to go down just yet, came around a few beats later and had his back. Their salvo pretty much wiped out the group of Death Eaters they were fighting.....but there was one more group coming.

Voldemort heard the fighting from behind the last corner, knowing this was his only line of retreat (he had four Death Eaters with him). He turned to them:

“Take out that wall, explode it outward.” The five of them took aim:

ABRUMPERE! ABRUMPERE! ABRUMPERE! ABRUMPERE!
ABRUMPERE!

The massed spells did their job, and the wall was turned into a ball-bearing-less claymore mine.....and it did it's damage:

WHAM!

Harry was caught square in the ribs and the back of the head, with a follow up explosion spell glancing off his left leg, while the twins somewhat shielded Hermione, taking the brunt of it in their backs. The shock wave knocked all four of them down, and the twins pretty much unconscious. Voldemort rounded the corner with his crew, and

Harry managed a weak Reducto at the first Death Eater.....but it hit right, nailing him in the head and putting him down (though he would live). Hermione struggled to get out from under the twins, and was helped up.....

By Voldemort.....who hauled her to her feet, his left arm around her neck, his wand at her head, hers on the ground next to her. He looked at Harry with grudging respect, not hatred.

“I have to admit Harry, you’re good. You’re every bit the fighter I’ve been hearing about and more. If I didn’t need to kill you I’d shake your hand.” Harry’s marbles were a little wobbly, but he managed to clear his head enough to reply.

“Likewise Tom, if you weren’t the Anti-Christ I’d almost admire your little plan here.”

The other three Death Eaters had levitated their injured colleague, and were anxiously awaiting Voldemort coming along.....though they stopped short of actually saying anything.

“So what should I do with your mudblood friend here? Kill her? Maybe I should take her with us, do some experimenting. After all, I’ve heard so much about her from Wormtail.” And Draco too, though Voldemort didn’t prefer to mention this. Harry was half sitting, half laying on the floor, and raised his right arm a little bit.....but stopped when Tom dug his wand into Hermione’s cheek, his other arm was slowly choking her.

“I don’t think so Harry. This isn’t one of those muggle films where the hero saves the girl. They force fed us those at the orphanage.....I so hated them. Put your wand down, and I won’t torture your friend. I’ll just kill her outright.” Harry surprised all three of them (including Hermione) by laying his wand hand on the ground, though he didn’t let go of it. Hermione’s eyes got very big.

“Thanks Harry.....Avada.....”

As soon as Voldemort said Harry, the young man in question raised his left hand.....the empty one, seemingly in a spasm of pain from one of his many injuries. Praying this would work, he mumbled:

Accio Wand

This was still the only wandless spell that Harry had a true handle on.....and it worked perfectly. Voldemort's wand flew effortlessly into Harry's left hand, and Harry used most of his energy for one last salvo with both wands:

REPULSAR!

The pulse spell grazed the top of Voldemort's head, simultaneously with Hermione kicking back with her heel, connecting with his ankle. Neither of these things knocked him down, and he retained enough of his faculties to throw up a wandless shield as Hermione (who was the least injured of the four friends) tried to curse him. Fred and George had been faking a little bit, and sent a few curses toward Voldemort's henchmen, and then put up shields that protected them and Harry from the non-killing curses that came back.....though not many did, as the bad man and his boys finally retreated. Within a minute or so, Harry's scar stopped tingling, signaling that his enemy was far away.....he had the connection controlled to the point that Voldemort's emotional state did not impact him very much.

Harry sat back against the wall.....right next to the space of wall whose parts had injured him. He put a hand to his head, and saw blood, though it wasn't gushing. He knew his left leg was broken, and probably at least four or five ribs. His head was still swimming a bit, but he summoned some strength from Merlin knows where.

"Dobby!"

The little elf popped in.....and almost had a heart attack when he saw Harry.

"Oh my, Harry, we must get you to a hospital....." Harry interrupted him, though he quite agreed with the sentiment.

“I have something more important for you Dobby. Take this wand, put it in my invisibility cloak inside the trunk. No one is to know about it, got it? Not even Sophie. Now hurry, I’ll see you in a little while.” He handed Dobby the wand he had captured (so to speak, some might prefer ‘scammed’) from Voldemort. The little fellow disappeared as Hermione rushed over to Harry.

“Oh God Harry, thank you.” She tried to hug him, but stopped when she touched his ribs and he let out a scream. She was about to pull back when he pulled her close.

“Hermione, don’t tell anyone about how I got that wand, or that I even got it at all. Just say I used the quick draw again.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That wand is the mate to mine, I can’t risk it going into circulation again. It’ll be safe in America. Trust me Hermione, I’ll explain it all later.” He kept her close, and they touched heads for a moment.

“Of course I won’t tell Harry.....thank you for saving my life.” This last part was whispered softly.

“I still owe you a few Hermione, I haven’t forgotten. But don’t forget this either: If I was a student at Hogwarts right now.....we’d both be dead.” It was just then that Bill and company came running around the corner. Ron saw his girlfriend and erstwhile best friend with their heads touching (though it was clear they weren’t kissing), and a rage started building within him.....but it was quickly extinguished when Hermione stood up, and he saw the blood drizzling down Harry’s face and the awkward angle of his broken leg. He quickly walked over to Hermione, eyes searching for any outward sign of injury. He didn’t see any.....except for a haunted look in her eyes, and a red mark around her neck.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay Ron, I’m not injured.” He took her in his arms, and Hermione, for the time being anyway, forgot what a prat he had been lately, and just let herself be comforted.

Bill walked up to his brothers, both of them grimacing in pain from their backs, and decided that humor would work best here with these two.

“Still alive eh? Merlin must have a sense of humor.” In bad taste perhaps, considering Percy, but fitting for these two. They got up, wincing, and managed to get Harry to his feet.

“We managed well enough, right George.”

“Right Fred, though Voldemort is one ugly bastard.....eh Harry?” Harry started to laugh, only to bring on another half-scream from his ribs, just talking hurt really badly.

“Don’t do that guys, not now.....and yeah, he won’t be put on the Witch Weekly list of eligible bachelors anytime soon.” The three of them stood there, agony on their faces, as Neville and Ginny each put an arm of Harry’s around their shoulders, relieving the twins of the weight.

“Are they all gone Harry?” Bill took one look at Harry’s leg, and conjured some bandages around it.

“They are from here Bill, I don’t know about the rest of the building. What’s happening inside? Where the bloody hell is Dumbledore?”

Speak of the devil, Dumbledore and company came rushing down the hall.....a hall that 30 meters down had bodies that resulted from the pitched battle between Voldemort’s rear guard and the Aurors who hadn’t been assigned to the trial. Bill waited until they got there before delivering his news.

“Harry.....he got Percy.” What? When last Harry saw him, Percy wasn’t even in the fight.....though Harry didn’t need to be told who the ‘he’ was.

“He fired a killing curse at me Harry, Percy pushed me out of the way and took it himself.” Ginny let go of Harry’s arm as it really hit her what had happened.....maybe saying it was the catalyst, who knows. Luna hugged her and tried to comfort her, while Dumbledore looked to be on the verge of tears himself, as Rufus came over from the courtroom, and Travis Biller strode tiredly up from the other battle.

“You want to tell them Dumbledore, or should I?” The old man looked confused.

“Tell them about what Harry?”

“That Percy was your man in Fudge’s office.....that he didn’t turn on his family.” The look on Dumbledore’s face confirmed Harry’s words.....and by looking around, one could tell that even Bill hadn’t known.

“He was what!”

“Yeah he was, Fudge told me at our meeting.....he’d known all along Dumbledore. I would have told you guys before now, but honestly it just slipped my mind.” Fudge knowing about his spy was clearly news to the Headmaster, as Bill was looking at him like he wanted to kill him.

“You let us think he betrayed us?”

“That was Percy’s idea Bill, your mother and father both knew what he was really doing. He wanted it kept secret, and it was his secret to tell you, not mine.” This was the first time Harry had heard Dumbledore make sense in quite a while, and it even took the wind out of Bill and Ron’s sails.....the twins, when not grimacing, didn’t look especially surprised either way, while Ginny was still crying on Luna’s shoulder. Rufus had quietly had one of the house elves on staff get a pain relieving potion for Harry, Fred, and George, who all drank the vials with gratitude. Harry looked hard at his erstwhile mentor.

“Where the hell were you Dumbledore? We sure could have used you 10 minutes ago. What happened at Hogwarts?”

“Werewolves attacked Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. They didn’t kill anyone at Hogwarts, but there were deaths in Hogsmeade, and the town was leveled.”

“So it was a diversion then.” This was Rufus talking, Bones was nowhere in sight.

“So it would seem. How many are dead here?” Biller answered for his part.

“15 on our end, and we had the entire available cadre battling it out. They had up some kind of barrier that wouldn’t let us get in. Once we did, we got about a dozen of them before they retreated.”

“Do we know how they got in Travis?”

“Not yet, but I’ve got people investigating it. We have another 10 or so injured, they’ve already been evacuated to St. Mungo’s.....speaking of the hospital.....we should probably get you there Harry.”

“They’ll patch me up at school.....how many did we lose in the courtroom Mr. Scrimgeour?”

“About 30 or so, including all the Aurors and eight members of the Wizengamot.....the non-traitors that is.” For the benefit of Dumbledore, Biller, and the others, Rufus took a moment to describe how the festivities in the courtroom had kicked off.

“You were a big help in there Harry, you inspired a lot of people to fight. Thank you.”

“Just doing my civic duty sir.” Harry was having trouble fathoming why no one was asking him about Voldemort.....but he wasn’t

looking a gift horse in the mouth.....until now, as Dumbledore turned to him, and asked gently.

“How did you acquire your injuries Harry?” Harry winced in pain as he waved his hand at the destruction around him, his pain was now just manageable, but by no means gone.

“You see the wall here, any other smart questions?” The old man sighed.

“There has been enough conflict today Harry, do we need to add to it?” That blasé word choice almost set Harry off, and he was wondering whether he had enough juice left for one more curse. The rest of them looked fairly appalled as well, with the twins in particular fixing their former Headmaster with incredulous looks.

“Conflict! Conflict! Well we spent our afternoon time a bit differently than you did! While you got suckered into a fool’s errand back at the homestead, we had to fight off a few dozen Death Eaters, who were quite intent on killing us! I just had to kill at least six people Dumbledore, and let me tell you that I’m not happy about it. Now while it was lovely to see you as always, I need to be going. Neville, Hermione, will you help me into the courtroom so I can pay my condolences to Molly and Arthur?” They both nodded, and Hermione disengaged herself from Ron and put Harry’s other arm around her shoulder. Ron took a deep breath.

“No Hermione, I’ll help him.” He and Harry shared a look of understanding, as he took his girlfriend’s place, and the two young men acted as a set of living crutches for Harry, as they slowly made their way back to the shambles that was the courtroom, Fred and George gingerly following. Ginny, Luna, Hermione walked ahead, clearing the path, though there were only a few bodies to step over. Along the way, Ron had something to say to Harry.

“Thanks for saving her Harry, she says she owes you her life.” Given Ron’s jealousy lately, Harry was mildly surprised that he wasn’t fuming that he himself couldn’t save her.....but Ron seemed

strangely subdued. Harry wondered if maybe Hermione had finally given him an ultimatum over lunch or something.

“You’re welcome Ron, I would never let anything happen to her.”

“Oh yeah, I didn’t give you up to Witch Weekly mate, I didn’t even know half that stuff.”

“Yeah, I never really thought you had, I was just a little pissed. Sorry about that.”

“Something I’m wondering. Bill told us that you don’t believe in the Prophecy, but you told us earlier that you agree you’ll have to have a showdown with Voldemort eventually.....what gives?” An inherent contradiction that was, and Harry was impressed that Ron had caught it.

“I don’t believe the Prophecy Ron, but Voldemort does, even if he doesn’t know all the particulars. He’ll force things until I have no choice but to really duel him.....what just happened doesn’t count. Give me another year or so with Ripley and my outside reading, and I’ll be ready.”

They hobbled into the courtroom to find that very few people had left (though Draco and Narcissa had exited the building), and many were gathered around Molly and Arthur.....neither of whom would let go of Percy.

“I’m so sorry, I don’t know what to say.” Molly looked up, tears still streaming down her face as she saw the mess that her surrogate son was, with her twins looking a bit worse for wear too. She leapt up and gave Fred and George a crushing hug.

“I’m so glad you two are okay, you were so brave, both of you.” The twins squeezed her back, it felt good to be alive. She made a move to hug Harry too, but he managed to stop her.

“Can we take a rain check on that hug Molly? I have a few ribs that need attention first.”

“Of course Harry dear.....oh my, your leg.....and all that blood.”

“Well I used the explosion spell quite a lot, it's only fitting that I got hit with the effects too. I am so sorry about Percy.....he died a hero though, he saved Ginny. If that's how I go, saving someone I love.....well I could handle that.” Arthur had his arms around Fred and George now. Harry looked around the room, as people from St. Mungo's entered, to handle the bodies. The injured had already been taken out, a relative few there were anyway.

“Hey, where did Fudge wind up getting to?” This was answered by Rufus, as he, Dumbledore, and Biller were just now entering the room.....having had a private chat.

“Good question, Amelia is beating the bushes, looking for him right now. Very curious his behavior.....then again, the man redefines the term 'curious'.” Rufus and Fudge had long been allies of expediency, neither caring for the other, but needing the other to advance. Dumbledore looked at Harry, and decided that his questions were worth the risk of antagonizing him.

“Harry, what happened with Voldemort? Did he confront you?”

“Yes, and I told him all about the Prophecy.” Harry wasn't so tired that he didn't appreciate the look on the old man's face. Hermione actually let out a laugh hearing that, which told Dumbledore that it was a joke.

“That was in very poor taste Harry. What happened?”

“My taste and yours don't need to match old man, as I'm not a student at your school any longer....surely you got the issue of The Chronicle I sent you? As for He Who Is a Git.....we had words, and I hit him with a Pulse spell when he wasn't expecting it. You old codgers, always underestimating me, pretty pathetic really.” The room was silent now, as Harry's insults hit home, much to the amusement of pretty much every Weasley especially.....and Luna, who let out a loud giggle. Harry felt a tickle on his defenses, and

managed to raise his mental shields up.....but he knew they wouldn't last for long, as tired as he was. He had to get out of here.

“Mr. Scrimgeour, Dumbledore is trying to use Leglimency on me.....I am holding you to your oath.....as I am you Remus (Tonks was helping out at St. Mungo's).” Both Rufus and Lupin looked at each other, and proceeded to raise their wands on Dumbledore. Rufus speaking first.

“Get out of his mind Albus, now. I swore an oath.”

“Don't try it Albus, we won't allow it. I swore an oath.” The tickling subsided, as Dumbledore relented. Harry knew it was pointless for the most part, the Headmaster would just get it from Hermione, who had absolutely no training in Occlumency.....or powerful wizards to intervene on her behalf at school. Still, the more off balance he could keep him, the better.

“No, I did not tell that fool the Prophecy. No, I did not kill him, nor he I. Yes, the explosion spells he and his boys used kind of racked the twins and I up. Yes, I'm going back to school now, its breakfast time there and I'm so hungry I could kill.....some more.....for some pancakes. Mr. Scrimgeour, is it okay if Travis comes over there to debrief me?” This did not seem to satisfy Dumbledore, but Rufus seemed to agree, and Biller was nodding as well.

“I don't see that being a problem. George, Fred, you can take him to my office and use the floo from there to get into portkey territory.” The twins looked a bit confused about where to go, so Remus intervened.

“I'll show you guys where it is. Come on.” Harry hugged the women one last time, and shook hands with the men.....his clasp with Ron lasting the longest. With one last look of respect at Percy, he said his goodbyes.

“I'll see you all next summer sometime.” The foursome left, as the others prepared for their journeys back to home and school. Rufus' office was one floor up, and Remus levitated Harry up the stairs. They got to the office, and the three younger men prepared to

floo.....and Harry decided to mend a fence (and prevent someone from blabbing about the new Map, soon to be completed).

“Remus, Voldemort was trying to recruit the vampires in America to spy on me.....and maybe do a snatch. That’s what the letter was about.” Remus was rarely surprised by Harry’s statements any more.....and this almost, but not quite, was a rarely.

“I’m guessing they said no.”

“You guess correct, sort of. They’re pretending to go along with it, to see what information we can glean. The American Aurors are running this with the Kindred leader I met. So what I told you earlier was technically correct, sort of.”

“Thanks for telling me.....I was half wondering if Voldemort was trying to recruit you in that letter.” The thought had occurred to Harry more than once over the months as well.

“Don’t tell the old man, he’ll tell Snape and Voldemort will know we’re playing him within hours.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell him. I agree, he’s too close to Snape for our comfort.”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot.....Sloper and Cho leading the DA? Have you people gone crazy?”

“They are Head Boy and Girl Harry, and they’re tops in the seventh year in Defense.”

“Oh, like that’s saying a whole lot. Neither of them have risked what Hermione and the others have. Did you at least go to bat for them?”

“I tried until I was blue in the face, but it was no use. Dumbledore doesn’t want Ron and Hermione to be focal points in the school any longer. Besides, you and I both know that neither of them are leaders, nor is Neville quite yet. Ginny and Luna are too young, even in my

opinion, even if Luna wasn't a little 'off'. Sloper and Chang won't wreck anything, and that's all we can hope for right now."

"I suppose so, but watch them like a hawk Remus. Anyway, I should get out of here."

"Be good Harry, talk to you soon."

"Take care Remus." The twins went first into the floo, to make sure that there were no 'guests' waiting for them when they got there. There weren't any, and Harry tumbled through, probably breaking another rib in the process, as he landed painfully on his bad leg as well. Fred conjured him up a cane for the little walking he would have to do. Harry had Winky come fetch the spell grenades, while he braved another trip through the trunk floo. Before that though:

"I owe you guys, big time. You had my back yet again, I won't ever forget that....I promise."

"Don't mention it mate, we wouldn't have it any other way." The three shared a moment, full of exhaustion.....and yet exhilaration at the same time, since they had fought their blood enemies and survived to tell the tale.

Harry emerged in his trunk to the anxious stares of Dobby and Winky.

"Dobby, is the wand where I want it?"

"Yes Harry, it's in the third drawer of the dresser."

"Good, now help me up to the room guys." Dobby went up to open the trunk lid, and Winky slowly elevated him to the top. Once up there, Harry told them that he wanted to go to the Dining Hall first.....he really wasn't hungry, that was just crap he threw at Dumbledore.....but he wanted to see Sophie before he went off to the med station. Dobby and Winky got him down to the main floor (the med station was in the basement, so it wasn't much further to go). He used his conjured up cane to hobble over to the Dining Hall.

Flashback five minutes to Great Lakes Dining Hall

Joanne Murray wore a troubled face as she walked in the Hall for breakfast. She was a bit later than usual, which was noteworthy for her.....and the expression on her face drew many looks from students and faculty alike. She whispered to Heyman for a moment, and then approached the table that held Sophie and her friends, which was their usual table near the door.

“Could you kids come with me for a moment.” They all froze in their chairs, this could only mean one thing: Harry. Murray said nothing, but motioned for Drew, Rick, and Terry to come with her and Heyman as well.....she felt Harry’s roommates should be told, and she had noticed Drew and Harry starting to become friends. They gathered in the hallway, eight teenagers and the two heads of the school.

“I don’t know another way to say this, so I’ll just say it. I just received a communication that the British Ministry of Magic was attacked by Dark Wizards.” The silence was thick in the hallway, as the kids tried to process this.

“Harry?”

“I don’t know Sophie, all I know is that it’s over now, and there are apparently a lot of casualties. Our government has a liaison inside their Ministry building, and he reported it to Boston a few minutes ago. They flooded me because Harry is one of us now, but no mention was made of him either way.”

“They have enough Dark Wizards to invade their government like that?” That was Jonas, but Claudia is the one who answered him.

“C’mon Jonas, we’ve all heard Harry mocking the quality of Defense teaching he’s gotten, and from what he says it goes back longer than that. How good could their Aurors be, with instruction that bad?” Murray was one of those instructors, albeit for just a year (1988-89 school year).....but she had to agree.

“When will we know ma’am?” This was the question wasn’t it?

“I don’t know Warrick, I don’t know.” Sophie looked worried, but she knew how much reading Harry had done, and she believed in him.

“He’ll be all right, if anyone can handle themselves in a battle it’s Harry.” Everyone looked at Sophie sympathetically, and Reiko grabbed her hand.

“I’ll be returning to my office after breakfast, I’ll see if there’s any further word. If that happens, you’ll all be notified immediately.” She didn’t tell them to keep this quiet, but all of them silently agreed to anyway. They went back inside, and ignored the looks and questions from their schoolmates.....who had easily noted the composition of the group, and surmised its purpose. Sophie and her friends picked at their meals in silence for a few moments, before they heard the kind of loud click of a wooden cane on the floor. They turned to look, and Reiko let out a little scream:

Bloody, hurting, with a bandage tight around his broken leg.....there stood Harry, with Dobby and Winky looking worried behind him.

“I think I need some medical attention.” Sophie leapt up and rushed over to him, and Harry had to yet again stop someone he cared about from hugging him.

“Ah, not so fast Sophie, I’ve got a side full of busted ribs, and a pain relieving potion that’s rapidly wearing off.” He directed her to his ‘good’ side, and she lightly squeezed him as the others came up. Claudia asked the obvious.

“What happened?”

“Quite a bit Claudia, it was a very interesting day over there.” Murray and what seemed like the entire faculty streamed over.

“Come on Harry, let’s get you to the med station.....and I believe you were already excused from class this morning. Questions, and I have a few hundred just for myself, can wait until you’re patched up.”

It was only now that Harry's strength finally gave out, as his good leg buckled and he started to collapse.....but Sophie hung on, and Warrick (who isn't small remember) managed to catch him before he hit the floor. Harry was still conscious mind you, but he was simply exhausted from the day's events.....and it still was only 2:20 in Great Britain, whose time he was still on.

Murray used Mobilocorpus to transport him downstairs to the med station, while Heyman strode quickly ahead to summon the doctor via the floo. Within minutes Harry was laying on an examining table, as Dr. John Carter began his examination, with Nurse Meryl Burbank assisting him. Harry had met both of them on his initial tour with Sophie, but had not had cause to use their services.

Great Lakes did not have a doctor and/or nurse just for them, rather they shared theirs with Salem. 36 year old John Carter had both muggle and Wizard medical training, and had been taking care of the 700 or so students of the two schools for four years now. He was based at Salem for his living quarters, while the 32 year old Burbank lived at Great Lakes, but with the floo, Carter was seconds away in case of an emergency.

Carter flashed his wand a few times, and a 3-D image of Harry rose above him, highlighting his skeleton and organs. Harry's injuries were fairly obvious to even an untrained observer.....who were all of them but four (Murray and Ripley had been injured more than once during their Auror tenures).

"Harry, you still with me? (he got a tired nod). Okay, you have one break and one fracture in your left femur, and you have five broken ribs on the left side, and two more that are cracked. You have no organ damage, and no head trauma other than a nice sized cut and a little blood loss. None of your injuries are permanent or life threatening, you have nothing to worry about okay?"

"Gotcha Dr. Carter."

"Good, now I'm going to give you some potions to speed the healing process. Your leg should be back to normal in a day or so, your ribs

sometime tonight. The cut will heal within an hour or so, and rest will replace the blood loss. The potions do not make you sleepy though, actually they tend to keep you awake more than anything. I want you to stay here the rest of the day and relax. You've obviously expended a lot of magical energy, and you need to recharge. Any questions?"

"Please tell the potions won't make me gag."

"No, but they're not Coke either, so don't expect to want to drink more than you need to. I'll stick around for awhile to make sure no complications occur."

"Thanks Dr. Carter. Professor Murray, a British Auror named Travis Biller will be around at some point to debrief me on my role over there."

"I know Travis, we'll make sure he gets down here to see you. I guess you can figure we're all curious about what happened over there."

"It's a long story ma'am, how about we wait until Travis gets here, that way I only have to relive it one time today." Murray decided that her curiosity could wait a few hours.

"Sounds like a plan. Okay everyone, off to class with you. Sophie, you can remain if you like, I'm sure Dobby and Winky can get your books when Harry goes to sleep."

"Um, Professor Murray?"

"Yes Harry?"

"I might have done something a bit rash earlier.....no, it's not what you're thinking, hear me out. I was doing some bragging on the school here, before the trial started, and how much I've learned and all.....and I told my friends that if any of them wanted to transfer here, I'd pay their fees." Murray had a smile creep across her face, it was kind of cute she thought.

“Did any of them take you up on it?”

“Well Ginny looked like she wanted to talk about it, and if stuff hadn’t come apart later on I think I would have gotten an interrogation. I think Hermione might think about it as well, she’s pretty fascinated with me taking Wandless Magic, and that alone might get her to want to come over here.”

“Hermione is the brain amongst your group there, am I remembering correctly?”

“Yes ma’am, she was one spot ahead of me in the rankings after OWL’s.”

“Well don’t tell them in advance, but I don’t think they would have anything to worry about if they want to come here.”

“Thank you ma’am. Oh, one more thing.....try and get Professor Kinsella here if he’s willing, stuff I learned in his class played a part.”

Murray agreed to floo Kinsella, with a curious look on her face.....she really wanted to know the story now. The group trickled off, with Wash promising Harry he’d come by that evening to tell him what went on in class. Burbank flooded over to Salem to keep an eye on things there, while Carter, after seeing Harry chug the first of his battery of healing potions, went into his office to do some paperwork. Sophie and Harry were alone now (with the elves hovering as well). She squeezed his hand, and kissed it.

“Are you in a lot of pain Harry?”

“A little, the potions are doing their job pretty well. Oh yeah, I’m sorry I didn’t contact you, but I had a good excuse.” He pulled some of the remains of his mirror out of his pants pocket. It had been in his robes when the explosion spell pretty well ruined it. Sophie hadn’t even thought of the mirrors, so happy she was that he was okay.

“Was anyone.....I mean.....”

“Percy died Sophie, Voldemort was aiming for Ginny and he pushed her out of the way. He’s the only one I really knew that died.” Sophie had never had anyone close to her die, all her close relatives (including grandparents) were still living.....even if she was disowned, she got family updates from her brothers.

“Oh my God.....did you see it?”

“No, I was in the hallway fighting a bunch of them off. Voldemort and I had our little thing a few minutes later.”

“You dueled him?”

“Not really, he and four goons fired the explosion spells that got me like this. The twins got pretty roughed up too, I hope they’re at St. Mungo’s right now. Voldemort was about to kill Hermione, and I summoned his wand.....with my left hand.” Sophie’s eyes got big as she heard that, she knew that Harry’s wand arm was his right one.

“You took his wand?”

“Yep, my own plunder from the battle. It’s in the trunk as we speak. Travis will want it when he sees my pensieve memory, but he isn’t getting it.” By now Sophie knew all about the history of the brother wands, she could see why he’d want to hide it.

“They’ll want to examine it I’m sure.”

“They can do a Priori Incantatum here, maybe, if I’m in a good mood. I like Travis though, so I’ll probably let him.” Now on to a pricklier subject:

“Harry.....did you kill anyone?” Said hesitantly.

“Yeah, I got six or seven of them that I’m sure of, I’m not sure about any injured. They were doing their best to kill me Sophie, it was dog eat dog in there.” He had a bad feeling about this, but she nixed it quickly.

“I’m not judging Harry, honestly. You did what you had to do. Its just that you’re 16 years old, and you’re being forced to kill people to stay alive.....it’s just hard to fathom for me. I guess I’ve led a sheltered life compared to you over there.”

“Don’t say that like it’s a bad thing Sophie, I’m glad you’re not exposed to what I’ve gone through.....except through my memories. But you’re right, I did what I had to do, and that’s the way it’s going to be from now on. I’m tired of having my life threatened on a constant basis, so anyone trying to harm me with a wand is going to get it back in spades. I figure if I kill enough of them, word will get out that I’m not to be trifled with. I won’t seek anyone out, I promise you that much. I won’t be a vigilante, but if they come here looking for trouble I’ll make sure that they find it.” This was so cold, Sophie thought, but she could understand it. She didn’t look at Harry any differently after hearing that, she just felt sad that it was necessary for him to feel that way.

“Will they come over here to try and get you? I know we’ve speculated on it.....”

“Nah, the Kindred thing is as close as they dare. Tonks told the Order that she’d never seen so many defense mechanisms on a building, and that was just from what she could see on the way in. I almost hope he’s dumb enough to try, Voldemort, it would be a good way to wipe him and his henchman out.”

“I knew we were well guarded, but only the faculty and the government really know how tight our defenses are.”

“Eh, he won’t come over. I’m sure if I’d skipped the trial he still would have done what he did. He seemed to come upon me almost by accident.” Sophie had a ton more questions, but she decided to wait until Biller got there. They talked about other things for a bit, Sophie still tightly gripping his hand, wanting the reassurance of his touch, and then had Dobby bring their books so that they could get some studying done. Right after Dobby left, Harry remembered to tell her something.

“Oh yeah, the twins have perfected the spell grenades. I have a box of them back in the trunk.” Sophie’s face lit up.

“So we should have the Map done this week then.”

“If I wasn’t in here tonight, I’d say we could get it done by tomorrow.....but this weekend is good enough. We’ll need to make sure it works for the Map spell, but they seem to think that it will.” Dobby came back in with Sophie’s Runes materials, and Harry’s Muggle Studies notes.

“Dobby, go get one of those balls that Winky brought back from the shop will you, and the new Map we’ve been working on.” Dobby popped off, and came back in a few seconds.

“A racquetball?” Harry shrugged, he had never played it.

“It was the twins, who knows where they get their ideas. Try the spell out, see if it works.” She took the ball, walked out of the room, and pointed her wand at it.

Exostra Zotheca a Tabula

She then threw the ball into the room, and it bounced around for five seconds before disappearing. Sophie followed it in, and looked at her boyfriend expectantly. Harry looked at the Map, and the med station was now active, with three dots representing himself, Sophie, and Dr. Carter (the Map did not show house elves, otherwise there would be no room for anyone else).

“Bingo. It works, more brownie points for the twins.” He then explained the limitations of the balls, and in fact Sophie was silently relieved that they were somewhat limited.

“This should be a big seller for pranks.”

“I would give quite a bit to see the look on Filch’s face if he ever figures them out, I almost feel sorry for him in advance.....almost.”

They skipped their books and started plotting strategies to get into the most rooms in the quickest period of time. They had both Dobby and Winky, so they decided to have a pair of three person teams to do it. The couple also talked about pranking targets, and easily decided that Joe Clancy (who Sophie disliked almost as much as Warrick and Reiko did) would be the focus of some attention this coming weekend.

Still, work did intrude, and after Harry guzzled another pair of potions, they got to their homework. This was lecture week in Muggle Studies, so Harry caught up on his reading and prepared for what Ziegler would be covering the next morning (this week it would be the 1860 Presidential Election). After lunch, Biller still hadn't shown yet, so Harry convinced Sophie to go to her Runes class (he had no classes on Monday afternoons himself), if only to get her out of her chair for a couple of hours. She went though, after making him promise up and down that he would not leave the med station. He readily agreed, and somehow managed to fall asleep for a couple of hours, before being woken by Carter to take his last batch of potions. By this time, his ribs were feeling a lot better, the cut on his head had healed nicely, and he was able to use the cane well enough to get to the bathroom and back.

Sophie came back after class, and they again just chatted comfortably as the others trickled in. The other four reacted much as Sophie did to the spell grenades, and they readily signed on to the three person teams.....and to some attention to be paid to Joe Clancy.

"Oh man, I can't wait for that, five long years of suffering to be revenged." Harry shook his head with a smile.

"If only you were going to be in on it Warrick."

"What do you mean?" Warrick looked indignant, he had been looking forward to pranking Clancy since the minute he'd found out about the Map and it's possibilities.

"It means that when we prank him, you're going to be in the library studying, with multiple witnesses to attest to it." Ahhhh.

“Plausible deniability, I get it. I probably would be the first person Heyman would suspect. Just make sure it’s worth it buddy, I want him to suffer a bit.”

“Well he won’t be coming in here afterwards, but I have some ideas of what to do.” He ran a couple of them by the group, and after a suggestion or two, it was agreed that when the opportunity presented itself, Mr. Clancy would be paid a visit of a sort. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Carter came through the floo and gave Harry another examination, and pronounced him to be doing well.

“If you want to go upstairs for dinner, go ahead, but I want you to spend the night here. I’ll give you another look-see in the morning, and then we can probably send you off to class.”

“I have Muggle Studies first tomorrow, nothing with my wand until Defense in the afternoon.”

“All the better, though I’m sure Professor Ripley won’t tax you too much after what you went through today. Now go eat, be back here afterward.” The seven of them (Drew had joined them a few minutes earlier) went upstairs for Harry’s fourth meal of the day (he and the twins grabbed breakfast on the way to the trial). Harry was still feeling a bit time-lagged, but the nap had helped him immensely. Harry spent a lot of the meal politely dodging questions about what had happened from other students, his standard line came to be ‘it was quite a day’. Afterward, they set up studying shop in the med station, only to be interrupted around 7 pm by Murray....and friends.

One of the friends was Travis Biller, who was at the tail end of a long, bad day. Accompanying him was Michael Jacobson, a 54 year old American who the head of Auror Command in Boston. Murray also had with her what seemed to be every one of Harry’s teachers (plus Lyman), and Rick and Terry as well. This was going to be a group session it seemed, but like Harry had wanted, he would only have to tell the story once.

“Hi there Harry, how’re you feeling?”

“Getting better by the hour Travis, how’re things back there?” A complex look washed across Biller’s face.

“It’s complicated Harry, very complicated. This is Michael Jacobson, he’s the head Auror here in the U.S. We’re all about sharing information nowadays, and better for the American government to hear about things firsthand than through The Daily Prophet.” Harry and Jacobson shook hands, and exchanged polite greetings.

“Now first things first.....you asked this afternoon about Fudge.” Harry could only glean one meaning from this statement.

“He was killed? The rearguard got him?”

“If wishing made it so Harry.....the Death Eaters got in and out through his office.” Harry put a finger in his ear and wiggled it around.

“No way did I hear that right. I could have sworn you said they got in through Fudge’s office.”

“Well then your hearing wasn’t damaged along with your leg and ribs. We have incontrovertible evidence, and Fudge has disappeared to boot.....along with three million galleons of Ministry money, done very skillfully over the last three years.” Dead silence in the room, as everyone took this in. Sophie looked at Harry’s reaction and was fairly chilled by it.....he was just shaking his head sadly. He wasn’t mad, wasn’t surprised.

“So he’s been a Death Eater all along.”

“Not necessarily. We do have people inside Voldemort’s operation willing to sell us information for the right price.....and our main seller told me that Fudge is not with Voldemort right now, and another one of our sources says he’s skipped the country. You yourself proved how easy it can be to do it without attracting attention.”

“Which do you think it is?”

“I tend to think that someone from Voldemort’s gang caught Fudge at his dirty dealing. It might even have been Lucius for all we know. Voldemort has so many pure-blood wealthy Death Eaters at his command that three million galleons wouldn’t mean terribly much to him. They would much rather have Fudge doing them some favors.”

“I can’t imagine that Fudge would be hard to find, aren’t there only so many magical places in the world that he could be?”

“In theory, yes. But Gringotts and its siblings aren’t especially cooperative when it comes to tracking money, and that’s the best way to track someone. As far as they’re concerned, anyone with access to a vault can do what they want with it. And Fudge didn’t take everything, he only skimmed over a period of time, so they don’t really care. As for other means of finding him, we have alerts going out to all governments around the world to be on the lookout for him.....he is rather distinctive looking.”

“But you’re saying that if he’s really careful, he won’t be found?”

“I’m saying that if he’s as careful as he should be, it will take a piece of luck to find him.....and I’m trying to remember the last time our Ministry got that lucky. I think it was when you got that scar, and that was quite awhile ago.” Harry’s hand reflexively touched the scar.

“So who is the new Minister of Magic?”

“Rufus has assumed power.” That was an interesting phrase wasn’t it?

“Assumed? I thought the Wizengamot elected the Minister?”

“No, they can only impeach the Minister, they can’t elect a new one. They only have 22 members remaining, barely enough to have a quorum, though I think it took about ten minutes to impeach Fudge. The next in line is the Head of the Wizengamot, then the head of the DMLE.....and both Dumbledore and Bones declined the job. Next is the head Auror, and Rufus felt he had no choice but to take it.

Diggory was next in line, and we certainly don't need him having too much power." Harry had heard rumors through the twins about Amos' erratic behavior over the last two years, particularly around and near the anniversary of his son's death.

"I've heard he never got over Cedric being killed."

"Now, on to another, more painful matter." He waited a beat to see if Harry would guess and save him the trouble, but alas, no dice.

"Harry, Snape has left his home and gone off to Voldemort." Oh brother, thought Harry.

"Surprise, surprise. Was this a setup by Dumbledore, or was it him showing his colors?"

"Here's what we know: around the time of the Ministry battle, Snape was outside for walk. He's allowed one a day under close supervision from his two Auror guards, the only times he's allowed outside. During that time, his minders were rendered unconscious, and he was gone. The Aurors don't remember a thing, except for waking up to see their prisoner gone, and a Dark Mark hanging over the house. Dumbledore swears up and down that he knows nothing about it, and from the look on his face, I'm tending to agree."

"You can't track his portkey use?"

"He didn't use a portkey to get out, and no one used them to get in. The anti-Apparation wards around the manor are still in place, but much of his Potions equipment is gone. We have his wand under lock and key at The Ministry, so he can't use that.....but we're guessing that he either took a long hike, or someone used muggle transport to pick him and his things up. We'll investigate more, but as you saw, we're a little short on manpower at the moment."

Harry made a silent vow that one day very soon, he would finish the job on Snape once and for all. He couldn't get out of his mind that Dumbledore knew all about this, and it was his way of slipping Snape back into the spy role that the old man believed was so vital to the

war effort. He was ruining the day he had just had the guy arrested and not permanently dealt with. Biller watched Harry's face very closely, and said a thankful prayer that he wasn't Snape, he knew what the lad was thinking.....and he never wanted to see that look directed at him.

"Now there will be time for more questions later Harry. I need to see your version of what happened in there. I've seen memories from Arthur, Bones, and Rufus, but I want to see your version." He pulled a small pensieve out of his robes, and Harry began gathering his thoughts. Travis pulled a quill and a pad of paper from another pocket (his robe was charmed to hold a lot more than it looked like it could).

"This isn't a Quick Quote's Quill Harry, don't worry. It will help me take down what I see."

"How far back do you want?"

"Well from what I hear the trial part was pretty boring (he hadn't been there, not being involved in the DOM incident), so begin with when you heard the Hogwarts alarm going off." Harry nodded his understanding. His memory was ready, and he placed it in the pensieve. Biller did the spell that projected it, and the nineteen people surrounding Harry's bed (Carter had wandered in, wanting to see what all the fuss was about) watched what happened during the 20 minutes or so of the battle. Harry himself was getting a lot out of it as well, noticing what others were doing in a way he couldn't before. The memory wasn't half over before he decided that the twins were going to be proxy buying a pensieve for him in the very, very near future. He could hear Travis quietly dictating to the Quill, and Harry was mildly surprised to hear that he was the only one who had really noticed Fudge's behavior.....yes he had looked around while it was happening, but thought that perhaps Bones and Rufus in particular were just keeping things close to the vest. But he saw that they barely even looked at Fudge.

Sophie felt like she was watching a horror movie, but involving people she should know. She spent a few minutes picking out people, since she had only met Fred and George.....but Harry had shown her a

few photos, and given descriptions of everyone. She eyed Hermione very closely, and marveled at how realistically Harry had described her to them. She felt a visceral reaction when Harry charged at the Death Eaters, and yet again when the explosion hit that injured him.

The main attraction of the memory, of course, was Voldemort. Everyone was spellbound as he and Harry traded comments.....and then it happened, Harry summoned the wand. To her credit, Sophie had believed him completely, and thus was the only one not shocked. Harry had only included the memory because he had to, it wasn't the situation of choice for him. The memory stopped as he and the twins flooded back to the shop. He made sure his route back here wasn't revealed.....though by now he assumed that Murray suspected something. As the memory disappeared, and Harry placed it back where it belonged, silence filled the room. Biller didn't put his Quill away, but fixed Harry with a stare.

"Where is the wand now Harry?"

"You heard where it was, and don't even think about trying a burglary, it won't work."

"An Anthony Hook trunk eh?"

"Yes, and I'm betting you knew I had the wand already Travis." Biller had a slow smile come across his face.

"Just what makes you think that Harry?"

"Hermione Granger, locked in a school with Albus Dumbledore. I'd bet a galleon that he had her in his office before teatime, and the information five minutes later. Dumbledore's slipping, but he is still pretty thorough on the whole, he wouldn't have passed that chance up." Biller looked suitably impressed.

"Very good deductive reasoning, it makes what I'm to give you in a minute that much easier. Yes, the old man told Rufus and I.....I was named Head Auror by the way.....Dumbledore told us about it, and

asked us to try and get it back.” Harry started snickering.

“Oh he did, did he? I’m fairly surprised he didn’t try to come with you and get it himself.”

“Like you said, he’s slipping, but he’s also not an idiot. He knows you would not respond favorably to a request like that from him, or even from me if he were here. All that said, we need to examine that wand Harry. It has immense forensic value, and would probably help solve a few questions we have.” Harry didn’t need to think about this, he wasn’t about to let that wand out of his sight.....well, out of his sight or his trunk.

“No, you can’t take it with you. But you can do your test right here, in front of all of us, if you want to. The wand stays here though, that’s the deal, take it or leave it.” Like I have a choice, thought Biller.

“I’ll take it.....which is what I was going to do anyway. I’ve heard the stories about your wand and his, I don’t want it back in circulation any more than you do.” For those uninitiated, Harry gave a minute long description of the relationship between his wand and Voldemort’s. Wash had a question though:

“What do you mean, back in circulation?” Other heads nodded, like they were thinking the same thing. Travis turned to Harry.

“Harry, would you like to say it?” He wanted to see if the kid was thinking as politically as he thought he might.

“Sure.....there were ten members of the Wizengamot who were traitors.....” Biller interrupted him.

“Eleven Harry, if you want to be technical. We found one dead body with a mask in his pocket, apparently he lost his nerve when the battle started.”

“Good grief (a head shake and a sigh). Anyway, there were eleven traitors there, plus Fudge.....I’m kind of doubting that was all of

Voldemort's people inside the Ministry. If any of them can get hold of it, then my little advantage will be gone. I won't take that risk."

"Nor will I. Now we have a deal I take it?"

"You take right. Dobby!" Dobby appeared next to him.

"Dobby, please go get the wand I have hidden." Dobby had this 'are you sure' look on his face, but Harry nodded to him that it was okay. He reappeared a moment later, with the wand in his hand, which at Harry's direction, he gave to Biller.

Travis took 20 minutes to do his tests, and the results left a lot of the people present sick to their stomachs, though they wouldn't have missed this for the world.. It had been two years plus since Voldemort's 'rebirth', and he had been a busy beaver. Sophie stopped counting the Avada Kedavras at around 50, and Crucio was probably quadruple that. Biller never stopped talking quietly into his Quill, and Harry suspected that the Biller generated pensieve memory of this would be a well watched thing at the Ministry tomorrow. Travis stopped it after seeing Harry's duel with the bad man in the cemetery. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Long day for you Travis."

"Yes it has been Harry, and it's not over yet. There's still things to do when I get home. I doubt I'll be going to bed anytime soon." He took an envelope out of his pocket, and tossed it to Harry.

"Rufus is in the process of reactivating The Dark Force Defense League. That envelope contains a formal invitation to join, as well as details on when the next meeting is to be held. If you want to do it, just have one of your elves deliver an acknowledgement to him." Harry had long heard rumors about the League, and Lockhart during second year had bragged about being an honorary member, but otherwise he didn't know anything concrete about it.

"What exactly is the Dark Force Defense League, and why hasn't it been reactivated before now?"

“The Dark Force Defense League is made up of all current and former Aurors, all Hogwarts teachers who teach wand classes, and every member of the Wizengamot, along with other invited members.....of which you can be one if you accept the invite. The other invited members include most of the richer wizards and witches in the country, most of whom just want to be able to say they’re in the League. Obviously the League is much smaller than it would have been this morning, what with losing 18 members of the Wizengamot and 34 Aurors.”

“So the League will be taking a lot of responsibilities that Aurors usually do?”

“To a point, though I think having an Auror as Minister will help a lot of things. It’s mainly there for public relations, to assure the public at large that they’re protected.....even if they’re not. We need to recruit more Aurors pretty heavily of course, and we can expect a lot of foreign born Aurors next year when the schools graduate their seventh year classes.....Joanne, you can expect to see me again come Spring.”

“You’ll be welcome of course.....though I don’t know what kind of response you’ll get.” Biller had an ironic smile.

“It will be an adventure I’m sure. Harry, do you have any other questions?”

“How well do Rufus and Dumbledore get along?”

“They have a détente going, but they’ve never been close. They had a few dustups when Rufus was Head Boy back in the day, but it never degenerated down to the level where you and the old man are at.” Travis stifled a yawn, he was exhausted, but wanted to finish his point. He wondered at doing it in front of such a large group of people.....but decided to hell with it, only Harry would probably ever set foot in Britain to bother him about it, unless he married the young woman who had his hand in a vise-grip.

“You see, Rufus has a hold over Dumbledore now that’s going to be very tempting: All it takes is for two Wizengamot members to resign or not show up, and they’ll have lost their quorum, and it’s the Minister who appoints new members, in consultation.”

“So Rufus gets hold of two members and effectively hamstring the Wizengamot.”

“I’m not saying he’ll do it mind you, but he can if he feels the need. Rufus has always been more of a politician than a soldier, which is how he’s risen so fast in the ranks. He has a year and a half before the next election to consolidate power, and we’ve long been speculating that he would have run against Fudge anyway.”

“Well if he can screw Dumbledore so badly, why didn’t he just take the Minister position himself to prevent it.”

“Because Dumbledore wants to believe the best of people Harry, and while it would occur to him that someone would do that, he’ll assume that they won’t. It’s probably why he put up with Snape as long as he did, and why he hasn’t given up on fixing things with you yet.....even if he doesn’t really think he’s done anything wrong visa vi you. That said, he’ll forgive you if you ever came back, because that’s what he most wants. It’s one of his greatest strengths, yet at the same time an exploitable weakness.” That theory, which had never really occurred to Harry, slammed a lot of things into place for him. It explained so much, especially about the Dursleys.....he’d always assumed some kind of family connection or blackmail in regards to Snape.

“Will you let me know if Snape surfaces in Voldemort’s camp?” He assumed that he would, but there was always the off chance that the bad man might have wanted to just torture and kill Snape.....a thought that put a warm feeling in Harry for a brief moment.

“Not a problem.” He looked around at the crowd, which was hanging on every word.

“If you folks could excuse us for a moment, there are some things I want to talk over with Harry in private.....and I hope you won't go blabbing about my quorum theory.” Everyone seemed to agree not to, and they slowly filed out. Warrick and company said that they'd be back later, the rest said they'd see him at breakfast the next day. Sophie refused to leave however, and Biller did not make an issue out of her presence.....figuring it would do no good anyway.

“Harry, what are your short term plans here? Are you coming back anytime soon?” So that's why he wanted people to leave.

“Not a chance, my reasons for leaving are just as valid as they have ever been. Dumbledore could handle this if he really wanted to. It makes me nauseous to say this, but he should have become Minister, then prosecuted the war.” Biller didn't look like he disagreed, but pressed on.

“Not a chance eh? Then don't accept the invitation to join the League.”

“Why not?”

“It's a trap, by both Rufus and Dumbledore.....who is the head of the League, if I didn't tell you. They want to have excuses to bring you back there more often. Rufus will want you as a poster boy, Dumbledore so he can keep an eye on you.” This was very revealing to the young man, who had been very tempted to join, thinking that it sounded cool.

“Thanks for the warning, I think I'll just decline the offer and stay here for a couple of years. Can you do me a favor though?”

“Shoot.”

“I know you guys are shorthanded and all, but could you keep something of a close eye on WWW. The twins were right with me today as you saw, it might make them bigger targets.”

“Sure thing, we’ll keep a closer eye on the building....but only the building Harry. They go messing about in Knockturn Alley at their own risk.” Harry nodded in agreement.

“Understood, I’ll let them know.”

“Good, now one last thing, and this is something I should have done a couple of months ago, if only by owl.....I would appreciate a heads-up the next time you come to Britain, for a public appearance anyway.” Harry didn’t think this was so unreasonable.....given that it would rarely need to happen.

“No problem, are you thinking security concerns?”

“For the most part, but it’s also best to be prepared for any eventuality. I’m not saying I need a week or anything, but just send one of the elves by before you come over.”

“I’ll do that, but don’t expect to see Dobby or Winky anytime soon. I may go to the shop periodically, but that’s about it until next summer I think, barring anything else weird happening.” I should be so lucky, thought Harry, but he had to plan anyway.

“Not coming back for Christmas at all?”

“I’m not planning to, I have someplace special I’ll be spending most of the holiday at, far away from Hogwarts and all it’s attendant problems.” Both Biller and Sophie were a little curious now, but held their questions.

“Fair enough. One last thing before I take off: I was a Gryffindor Harry, one year behind your parents. I played Quidditch with your dad for four years, and succeeded him as Head Boy.....I mourned him and your mum Harry, and they would have been proud of you today, I have no doubt.” Harry never got tired of hearing that, especially now from someone who had known his mum and dad well. He smiled tiredly.

“Thanks for that Travis, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome Harry, see you soon.....hopefully not too soon.”
Biller left the med station to meet Jacobson, who was waiting for him in the hallway. He would soon hit the floo, back to Boston where he could portkey home.....and get some sleep sometime this week.

“I’m glad you’re not going back Harry, I was a little worried that if the war exploded you’d be tempted.”

“Nothing has changed over there Sophie, and certain people here have given me every reason to stay.” She smiled, and gave him a kiss (Carter was still around, so snogging wasn’t too practical).

“What did you mean just now about someplace special to go to for the holiday?”

“In Sirius’ will I inherited more than just a lot of money, I inherited an island too.....in the Caribbean. Not a bad place to get away from the snow that we’ll be hit with up here. I’m going to have Dobby or Winky go down there soon to check it out. Should be fun.”

Yes, it would a lot of fun indeed. Christmas was just under three months away, who knows what will happen in between though.

End Chapter

Tuesday, October 1, 1996

Dining Hall

8:15 am

Harry had been cleared for takeoff by Dr. Carter first thing in the morning. His ribs were now totally healed, and his leg was well enough along that he could go to class. Carter had given him a real cane to use for a couple of days, and Harry showed up at breakfast with a cane, a limp, and a big appetite. He had done a bit more studying the night before, and was actually a bit ahead for the week.....Hermione would be very proud of him he thought. He was in a good mood until the mail came.

The current issue of The Chronicle was full of news of the Ministry battle that Harry had been a large part of, and while his fellow students had suspected that some kind of fireworks had happened, this was confirmation. The articles, and there were more than one, quoted heavily from British sources, and gave a standard 'Potter was unavailable for comment' in most of them, though Harry wondered if they even went through the motion of trying. They treated him pretty gently all told, though the fact that he had killed Death Eaters was mentioned more than once. There was a lot of 'so that's what happened' from his schoolmates, and a few of the bolder ones asked what it was like to kill someone.....though they didn't mean it harshly, just curiously, though it was obvious to them immediately that Harry didn't appreciate those specific questions. Harry now had a sinking feeling, and figured he might as well know than not know.

"Dobby!" The little elf popped in.

"Please go to Diagon Alley and find me a copy of The Daily Prophet and bring it back here."

"Yes Harry, I will be right back." Off he went.

"What do you think it'll say Harry?" Harry grimaced.

“Well Claudia, having read The Chronicle, I’m betting my new nickname will be ‘The Boy Who Killed’.” Dobby was soon back, paper in hand.

“That was quick, I didn’t realize you kept money on you.”

“Oh no Harry, I just went to the shop and took the twins’ copy. A sickle saved is a sickle earned. Um, Harry.....twin Fred said you should sit down when you read it.” Uh oh.

This particular issue was entirely devoted to yesterday’s events, as expected, and the front page was almost one large series of headlines:

CHAOS AT THE MINISTRY! HOGSMEADE DESTROYED! YOU KNOW WHO IN PUBLIC!

Well that wasn’t so bad thus far was it.....well it was bad of course, but nothing so far dealing with him. Harry thought Fred might have been exaggerating. Then he turned the page, and saw it.

“Potter in Thick of Things at Ministry Battle!”

The headline may not have been lurid, but the accompanying article left little to the imagination. It was readily apparent that the writer, who Harry had never heard of, had been a spectator to the proceedings. Harry’s very active role in the events was detailed exhaustively, and a pretty accurate chart of the spells he had used was included.....and an entire, very long, paragraph of the story was devoted to Harry’s use of Parseltongue. The writer, in his defense, did mention that Harry sent the conjured snakes straight at the Death Eaters, but it was a brief mention. The writer also painted a rather stark portrait of Harry as being ruthless in his attacks on the Death Eaters, and more than implied that revenge was a motivation for him. His encounter with Voldemort was touched on briefly, but they had very few details, other than that Harry had hit him with the Pulse spell.....a spell the writer noted was one not taught at Hogwarts.

Another article dealt with the abbreviated trial itself, and heavily played on Lucius' insistence on bringing Harry up in every cross examination. Also printed, and the one part that made him smile, was a word for word account of his insults with Dumbledore.....and then he stopped smiling when the writer speculated on 'The Prophecy', and what Harry might have meant when he said that. None of his teenage friends were quoted in the articles, and only short quotes from Bill and Arthur. Harry, on the whole, came off not really as a hero in these articles, but more as.....well he couldn't put his finger on what he came off as, just that it seemed to have a negative tone throughout, though he reckoned it could have been worse. Part of him mentally railed at the ingratitude, he could very easily have pulled a Draco and sat the battle out. The problem with that is that he knew the article instead would have been ripping him for being a coward. Harry was very proud to be British, but sometimes he had dug a bit deep to find the reasons for that pride.

To be fair though, most everyone was getting nailed in The Prophet this day. Fudge took a bashing, though it seemed that his embezzlement and country fleeing had not been announced yet. His exiting the courtroom at the sound of the Hogwarts alarm was just seen as cowardice, and the writer merely mentioned that his office had 'no comment'. Bones and Rufus had some hide peeled as well, for their lack of foresight that something like this might happen, as well as the escape of the Death Eater prisoners. Dumbledore by and large got a pass, other than a few criticisms that weren't really specific to the day's incidents. It was more or less agreed amongst the various writers that he had to return to Hogwarts and make sure the children were safe, and was thus excused for not being in the battle.

The people who came off best in the paper, were of course, the dead. Glowing obituaries had been written for the eight non-traitor Wizengamot members who had fallen, as well as the 34 Aurors who had been killed. Harry learned that there had been eight Hogsmeade deaths, and he was saddened to read about The Three Broomsticks. He now knew that he wouldn't see his Hogwarts based friends anytime soon, since you couldn't have a Hogsmeade weekend without a Hogsmeade to go to.....not that he was dying to go, but life

was all about options, and he hadn't closed his mind completely to that one.

He passed the paper over to Sophie, and hobbled up to Professor Murray at her table, which had five other faculty members, including Heyman, Ripley, and Lyman.

"Feeling better Harry?"

"A bit tired, but not bad considering. I just saw The Daily Prophet from Britain, and I was wondering what my Howler count was." Lyman actually started chuckling at hearing this, and was surprisingly the one who answered:

"I made a point of checking for you before I came down to breakfast, you're at three so far, but the day is still young, and they take awhile to get here." Hedwig had taken two days to reach Great Lakes from WWW, so this was a bit curious, the three coming so quickly. He put that away though, and had a laugh as well.

"I wonder if it will catch my total from coming to school here? Anyway, thanks." He made to leave, but Ripley stopped him.

"Harry, today in class I would like you to show your battle memory again, so the others can learn from it." Harry thought for a second, and saw no real harm in this, four of them had seen it already anyway: Sophie, Reiko, Claudia, and Drew, as well as Ripley himself.

"That's fine, but I would prefer to only show them the battle, not the aftermath. They don't need so much personal insight into my former life and dealings." Even though almost 20 people from school had seen the whole thing, Harry felt that the line had to be drawn somewhere.

"I don't have a problem with that. I'll want your views on what happened, and what you might have done differently, so start thinking about it. I'll give you some extra credit on your second term paper, since you already have some coming from the day one mock battle."

That term paper was due in three weeks, and Harry had written about half of it, dealing with his personal dueling style.

“I’ll be ready sir.” He went back to the table, but didn’t tell his friends what was in store for them that afternoon. Sophie and Reiko had their heads together, reading the paper.

“I’m only at three Howlers, I mean what’s wrong with those people? I’m ‘The Boy Who Killed!’” His roommate smiled amiably at him.

“I’ll be happy to send you one, maybe we can start a campaign here at school.”

“Funny Warrick, we need to send you out on tour.”

“Just trying to help, good grief, nobody ever likes my ideas.” The others showed Warrick how much they liked his ideas by pelting him with food. This is something that happened relatively frequently, so the other tables just laughed as Warrick cleaned the mess of himself and the table. They soon went off their separate ways, with Harry and Jonas making the trek to Muggle Studies.

“Are you going to be okay to play Quidditch next week?”

“I should be, Carter didn’t seem to have a concern about it when I asked him. I’m looking forward to Quodpot the next day, I’ve never seen a real game.”

“It’ll be a wild weekend, I need to start ragging on Claudia about it, with us playing Shawnee.”

“I’m sure it’ll be just the thing to get you two together.” Harry started laughing, but Jonas was just shaking his head in exasperation.

“Don’t you start too Harry, just because you’re in love, doesn’t mean you should try to foist it on the rest of us. Claudia and I are fine like we are. She doesn’t want a boyfriend right now, and I don’t need the

drama of trying to convince her. This way I get to pick and choose.” Harry had heard this line before, but never said so vehemently.

“You really don’t have those kinds of feelings for her.....do you.” Not asked as a question, but more along the lines of confirming a slight revelation.

“Not really dude, no. I used to, but Claudia kept putting things off and putting things off, though not in a mean way or anything. I guess I gave up, I don’t want it to be a case of me wearing her down. She could tell me she loved me right now, and I don’t think I would say it back.” Harry and Jonas only really spent this time alone together, the time before and after Muggle Studies, so it’s not like they talked all the time. Harry had always just thought it was a matter of time, since that’s what Warrick and Sophie had been telling him.

“Fair enough, no more static about it from me, I promise. I only really did it because the others did, I don’t blame you for being tired of hearing it.” And he didn’t, one reason he had never really pursued Hermione is that he didn’t want to prove right the jerks who’d just assumed that they would.....and he suspected Hermione felt that same way.

“Thanks man, believe it or not I appreciate it. I won’t ask you to try to convince Sophie.....” He trailed off, clearly hoping to do just that.

“I’ll mention it to her, but you know what your real problem is.” They both said it together.

“Warrick.”

“Right in one mate, and that will be your problem.”

“Eh, he just likes getting a rise out of Claudia, I’m not even sure he expects us to hook up anymore.” Oh yes he did, thought Harry, but he let it lie for now.

They got to class and sat through another Ziegler three hour marathon, with it’s attendant ten minute break. Ziegler looked and

acted like a mope, but his speaking style was such that he could engross you for that length of time, and you would not feel bored. Harry had heard that Professor Mendoza, the elderly man who taught Advanced Muggle Studies, was just as serious, but at the same time not nearly as interesting. There were even stories of students who had deliberately tanked their Muggle Studies OWL tests so as not to be in the Advanced class.....as students who got O's were not allowed to take the regular course if they wanted to. Jonas, who had told Harry the rumor in the first place, said that he wasn't one of those who had tanked.....but he said it with a notable lack of sincerity, he had all but winked.

Defense Classroom B

2 pm

The first hour of Basic Combat was spent on target practice, a new exercise which Ripley said would be happening with more and more frequency. The students practiced firing Reducto and other explosive spells at cinder block targets that their teacher had set up. Today it was basically just archery with wands, though in the future there would be moving targets and other challenges. This was somewhat similar to the student Olympics held every May, but without the destruction. He even intimated that another mass duel was upcoming, but declined to give any timetable when pressed. Harry was offered the chance to skip this, but he declined, this would be the only time today he had to use his wand. He used a mixture of Reducto and Repulsar, and like everyone, had some fun destroying the cinder blocks. He wore down about halfway in, but just shot the spells less frequently for the remainder of the time.

The second half of class was devoted to the Harry at the Ministry playback. Against his better judgment, Harry had allowed them to see the Voldemort duel as well, but not until he elicited a series of threats/promises from Ripley about the other five students not going blabbing about the fact that Harry had the bad man's wand. Ripley quietly asked Harry what the big deal was, it's not like Voldemort didn't know who had his wand. Harry replied that he just wasn't comfortable with the whole world knowing about it, so he cut the memory off as it showed Voldemort and his boys retreating. They

watched the playback twice, once in silence, and the second time with Harry providing a running commentary about who everyone was, and what he was thinking when he did something. After this, Ripley shut down the pensieve, handed Harry his memory back, and hit him with a question:

“Well Harry, what would you have done differently?” Harry had watched the first playback with an eye specifically toward answering this question.

“Well for one, I would have exhorted the gallery behind me to do more. I realize they were scared, and not everyone charges into risking their lives like I do.....but another dozen of them fighting would have made a ton of difference. Another thing, I would have kept up the snake thing, maybe others behind me would have copied it, that would have drawn off a lot of fire.” Ray Elwood, Proctor House, had the most obvious question:

“ Why didn’t you use a more destructive curse against that Voldemort guy? I mean I know you were tired.....hell I’m exhausted just from watching it twice, but you really didn’t have anything left?”

“More or less, yeah I was Ray....and I don’t blame you for asking, I’d have done the same. The Pulse spell takes very little energy to fire, and I just didn’t have anything else left. Plus, there were political considerations to worry about. If I had used Avada Kedavra, I could very well have been arrested immediately afterward.” That even took Ripley by surprise.

“You think after killing a dangerous Dark Wizard you would be arrested? I mean the nickname notwithstanding, there are some Unforgivables that are forgivable.”

“I would not have been willing to take the chance. I decided that soon after the first spell was fired. That was another reason I didn’t try Avada Kedavra, I needed to make sure I had enough energy to maybe fight my way out. You guys don’t understand the political situation over there. I almost got thrown in prison last year for using a Patronus to save my cousin’s life and my own, I explained what

happened and almost half the Wizengamot thought I was lying.....just because they didn't want to believe it, or because it suited their purposes to see The Boy Who Lived taken down a few pegs. Call me paranoid, you wouldn't be the first.....but I won't go to jail in exchange for killing Voldemort." Nobody could blame him for thinking that. A couple of questions were asked about the Pulse spell, and during his commentary Harry had mentioned that Drew had taught it to him, so he let him answer.

"Repulsar was developed a few years ago by our Auror Command to combat Lycans, and to a lesser extent, Kindred. It's meant as an easily re-usable delaying spell, one that leaves no outward marks other than a bruise.....or lost teeth if you hit it just right, as Harry proved yesterday. No strange messes for muggles to notice if they happen upon the scene, no uncomfortable questions. I used it the first day here last month just to try it out, and because if done a certain way, won't injure anyone. My dad taught it to me over the summer, and it's become part of the standard package of defensive spells that every Auror uses." Drew wasn't known for giving long discourses like that, so everyone paid attention to the rarity. His father, Mitchell, was a senior level Auror, stationed long term in Milwaukee, which is why Drew attended Great Lakes. His mother, Hollie, was a Midwestern Representative to the 25 person Wizard Congress.

A few other technical questions were asked, and then class was dismissed. Ripley held Harry back for a moment, his friends lingered with him.

"What are your plans with that second wand Harry? Are you going to work out with it?"

"I don't know really, I haven't thought much about it. It's the wand mate to mine, so I bet it would work pretty well for me."

"Let me know when you decide you want to do something with it, I'll set up some exercises for you. It's in a secure place?"

“Totally secure, I’m not worried about Voldemort coming to get it.” And he wasn’t really, he doubted anyone had the creative mind to suss out that Harry and the twins each had a floo capable trunk, and even if they did, Harry’s floo address was nigh impossible to guess, even if they somehow gained access to the one at WWW.....and the twins had it pretty well hid, and booby trapped, even Lee Jordan didn’t know they had it.

The kids went off to their rooms to get rid of their books, and the trunk sextet met in Harry’s trunk to discuss Map plans. The Map was pretty much a skeleton without muscles right now. They had all the hallways done, along with the four Lounges, and all their classrooms. What they were lacking was most of the teacher offices, and practically all of the dorm rooms, along with a couple of locked rooms in the basement. Warrick was quite gung ho to get started.

“Let’s start after dinner, at the very least we can get the basement done.”

“How many people do we want doing this? Won’t we attract some attention with the six of us wandering around?”

“You’re right Reiko, what we need to do is have the three person teams like we talked about, but only one team at a time goes around. That team will have the Map with them, and can check it for anyone coming up on them.”

“So who should go first Harry?” Harry looked around, it’s not like there was an easy lineup to select.

“Well who doesn’t have any homework that has to get done tonight?” Harry and Jonas were the only ones to raises their hands, though Sophie cleared her throat.

“Well I have about an hour of Runes if we can wait that long, I’m caught up otherwise.”

“Cool, it’s a plan then. At 8 pm the three of us will head down to the basement. The rest of you, see if you can get Clancy’s room. If he’s

in the Lounge, slip out and use Winky to quickly get his room on the Map. We need to get an eye on him as quickly as possible, but don't do anything rash Warrick, I always see him watching you." Indeed he was, it was widely rumored within the junior year Cortez boys that Clancy was fearful of some kind of retaliation for his years of rumored tattling. Warrick was considered the most likely to nail him, since he had served the most detentions.....though as stated before, he could never prove anything.....until now, because of the Map. That's why Warrick and Reiko, more so than the other three, were big believers in the Map, they wanted it more as an early warning system than anything.

The nighttime excursion went off without a hitch, as the Map now included all of the basement rooms. This included the mysterious conference room that Winky had noticed on her initial forays when drawing the blueprint. They tried to get in, but as with all the dorm rooms upstairs, they had magical locks.....which could only be opened here at Great Lakes by Murray, Heyman, and whoever they keyed in. Joe Clancy's room also was added to the Map, as he was spotted heading to the library soon after Harry and company left. Reiko and Winky slipped off for a few minutes and got him on the Map. The staff offices were going to be hit on the weekend, as most teachers had families and did not live on campus, though many worked late on the weeknights. Notable exceptions were Murray, whose husband was a doctor at a muggle hospital in Marquette, Michigan. He was seldom seen at meals though, and they had no children; Heyman, whose muggle wife had passed on five years earlier, their children were now out of school; and Lyman, who just liked being single too much and was always wandering around. The three of them, and a few others, lived in rooms off of their offices. Harry was half tempted to tell Lyman about the Map, just to see what he'd say, but Sophie had thus far talked him down from the ledge on that one.

That night, after a re-read of his so-so publicity from The Daily Prophet, Harry wrote a short, very polite letter to Rufus Scrimgeour, declining membership in The Dark Force Defense League. He cited his current school commitments, as well as his gut feeling that most of the older wizards in the League would be opposed to his joining, causing unneeded controversy at such a difficult time in their society.

This was all quite true of course, so it was easy to come up with. What Harry didn't put down, though he dearly wanted to, is that he had absolutely no faith in The Ministry at all, beyond it's simple desire to mean well, and even that didn't include everyone. The idea of putting himself under even the nominal control of Rufus or Dumbledore left him a bit cold. He didn't want to close the door on a potential return to Britain after he graduated Great Lakes though.....indeed he mentioned in a PS that if the invitation were still good in July, 1998, he would probably accept it.....he didn't really mean that, but the word 'probably' is very vague, and sounds promising.

He received a brief acknowledgement a few days later, which matched his own note for its politeness and vagueness. The reactivation of the League received wide coverage in The Daily Prophet, but no mention was made of Harry's refusal. Rufus' stock went up in Harry's eyes, he wasn't going to throw him under the bus, Harry's new Howler count had leveled off at around 25. The Fudge scandal still had not broken, though the papers by the end of the week were starting to note that he had not been seen in public since the trial. Amazingly, none of the Americans who heard Travis' talk in the Med Station blabbed, feeling the Brits should deal with Brit business, so nothing appeared in The Chronicle. A couple of Harry's teachers approached him in wonderment by Friday, curious as to what was going on. He shrugged his shoulders, as confused as anyone. He sent a quick note, via Dobby, to Arthur, asking him about it, and got back a reply a few hours later. Arthur said that only the Heads of Department even knew about it, and everyone was pretending that Fudge was simply on vacation. Meanwhile Rufus, Bones, and Dumbledore were trying to figure out just what damage had been done, and how to ensure nothing like this happened again. He cautioned Harry about spreading this around, leaving Harry a bit amazed that just as many Americans knew about Fudge as Brits did.

The Map wound up being completed that weekend, though it took longer than they had expected. The problem was the amount of dorm rooms to get, and that they had no real access to Proctor House. Even their blueprint of Proctor was just an assumption that the dorm rooms were laid out just like Jefferson, Cortez, and Shawnee. Like with Hogwarts, there was no outside access to the individual rooms.

Eventually they risked doing it at Sunday dinner, as Claudia and Reiko stood outside the Proctor Lounge, loading up the grenades as they had both Dobby and Winky popping into hopefully empty dorm rooms.....thankfully they were all empty, except for one room where a Novice student was taking a nap. Sophie was standing at one corner of the hallway with the Map, in case someone came along. The whole operation took about 20 nerve racking minutes, but came off without any hitches. Harry, with his new found legalistic mind, had perused the Great Lakes Code of Rules, and had not found anything specific that prohibited what they were doing.....but they knew that Murray and Heyman would not look upon this fondly. That was one reason Harry had eventually coughed up to Remus the contents of the Pettigrew letter: he didn't want the man deciding that Harry needed a little comeuppance, by telling Murray about the Map.

The other three Houses were much easier, as they could just walk up and down each hallway and knock on doors, though again they did it during meal times. Their easy cover story, for those who actually answered, was that they were taking more orders for WWW. Harry had delivered the packages on Thursday, but no one questioned them. They had five situations where someone answered, but they just had one of the elves pop in behind them, drop the grenade, and pop out. They all gathered in the trunk after dinner Sunday.....well dinner in the Dining Hall for the guys, the girls shared a Winky made pizza, since they had been on Proctor duty most of the meal. There were things to discuss and decide. Jonas went first.

“Harry, are you going to be wanting to get Drew in on this?” Harry had thought long and hard about this, but hadn't really come to any decisions. He liked Drew, he was a nice contrast from Warrick and Jonas, but wasn't sure if this was going to be his kind of thing.

“I'm thinking no, for the time being. Let's see what kind of reaction he has to our initial pranks. Besides, the six of us did the work to get the Map up and running, we should be the ones to realize the initial fun.” Warrick had been preparing that same argument, but was kind of surprised that Harry of all people beat him to it.

“But down the line you'll want to?”

“Down the line is down the line. Right now just the six of us, plus Dobby and Winky, know about this, let’s keep it that way.”

“So you don’t have any intention of letting him in on the trunk either?”

“Well no I don’t Jonas, though I don’t consider the two of them linked. One doesn’t have to follow the other as far as I’m concerned. It’s the same with Rick and Terry, it’s kind of inconvenient not to be able to go inside when they’re in the room, but better safe than sorry. Now, have you all picked your Marauder names?” They all nodded. The group had debated a few choices, and quickly came to the consensus that they didn’t all have to be animal names, since none of them were to become animagi.

“Are you still going to be Prongs?” Harry had endured second thoughts about this over the weeks, as he was mildly afraid that Murray might have seen the Map during her tenure at Hogwarts, or that she might have heard a few stories. The only teachers at Hogwarts at that point who had been schoolmates of the original Marauders were Snape and McDowell.....and McDowell had been the other teacher, with Flitwick, in the trade that brought Murray over. Harry had a hard time fathoming Snape trading stories with Murray though. In the end though, he decided to take the chance, he really wanted to feel like a part of his father here.

“Yeah Reiko, I am. There are risks in it, but if we don’t sign our work, then Murray would only suspect something if she gets hold of the Map.”

“Well we don’t want that under any circumstances. I’m going to go with Quicksilver. It’s my grandma’s nickname, and since I already one have one grandmother’s name for real, I want this to be the other one.” Reiko’s maternal grandmother, who was full blooded Japanese, was also named Reiko, and her grandmother Aylesworth had fine silver hair.....and won the 100 and 200 meter dashes every year at the National Age Group Track and Field Championships in her age category, hence the ‘quick’ part. Warrick smiled, grandmother

Aylesworth, whose son had married a half Japanese woman, had no trouble with her granddaughter dating an African-American young man. She had immediately treated him just like family at Christmas time when they met, even though Reiko had only just started dating her long-time friend.

“I’m going to with Magician, I love the irony that when people think of magic, they think of Siegfried and Roy, and people like that. It’s one reason we’ve been able to stay so hidden here, it’s a gentle way of mocking the muggles.” Harry hadn’t been in America so long that he knew who everyone was:

“Who’re Siegfried and Roy?” Warrick took a few moments to fill him in, and Harry was scratching his head.

“So they’re tiger trainers? How’s that magic?”

“Don’t worry about it dude, we’ll go see a show next summer maybe, you’ll understand then.” Harry wasn’t so sure about that, but he took his word for it. Claudia was next, she and Jonas had been debating this together for weeks.

“I’m going to be Cherlindrea, from Willow. I liked how graceful she was.....even though I know I’m not.” Claudia hadn’t always been tall for her age, she had grown six inches in the last two years, and was just now catching up in coordination. She wasn’t ashamed of it though, she just acknowledged it and moved on. The two boys had been after her to at least try Quidditch or Quodpot, to help her that way, but she demurred. Jonas:

“ Well in keeping with the Willow theme, I’m going to be Madmartigan, the epitome of cool, and a badass warrior to boot.” Harry grinned, he had loved the Val Kilmer character as well.

“I love you Sorsha? I don’t love her, she kicked me in the face, I hate her.....don’t I?” They all started giggling at Harry’s favorite line from the movie. They all turned to Sophie, she was the only one left without a name. She had been thinking long and hard on this, and

had discarded many possibilities. Even Harry was leaning forward, curious, she hadn't told him what she had picked.

"I'm going to be Half Pint, after Laura Ingalls. I grew up watching reruns of Little House on the Prairie, and she's always been my favorite character from TV, and literature after I read her books." They had all heard her speak of this, it made sense.

Harry pulled out the piece of paper that Remus had given him in August. He cast the listed spell on the new Map, and after it glowed, it went blank. Harry then pointed his wand at it.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good"

After a few seconds, some writing appeared.

Messrs. Prongs, Madmartigan, and Magician, in concert with Misses Quicksilver, Half Pint, and Cherlindrea present you The Marauders' Map II.

Eureka, it worked. After some discussion, they decided that Quidditch/Quodpot weekend would be their 'grand opening', so to speak. This was going to be a lot of fun.

Monday, October 7, 1996

After a week of a Fudge-less society, Rufus finally gave into the pressure and announced that the now former Minister had decamped, taking a few pieces of loose change with him.....they didn't announce the total. The press release to The Daily Prophet was brief and to the point, and covered with the usual lurid headlines.....all to relatively little effect. The twins, backs totally healed from their herniated disks and bruised muscles, came into the trunk the next night and told Harry that there was little stir in Diagon Alley about it. Few of the merchants, and the general public for that matter, were surprised that Fudge would do his cowardly deeds, so it was hard to be mad. They had all known what they were getting when they elected him, choosing not to have a dynamic leader who might take more and more power unto himself/herself. Rufus was not seen as

terribly dynamic, but he was perceived to be solid and trustworthy, so there was little added controversy.

On Wednesday at lunch, Harry received a short note from Dumbledore, his first since the letter informing him of what would become Snape night at the Dursleys.

Dear Harry,

I hesitate to write this, but recent events make me feel like I have no choice. Rufus Scrimgeour has informed me of your declining of the invitation to join The Dark Force Defense League, and while I know mine is the last opinion you are seeking, nonetheless I am asking you to reconsider. I have seen Rufus' memory of the Ministry battle, and I am astounded at the skill you showed. Your defeat of Voldemort was also very impressive, and your lateral thinking was inspired. The war effort needs you Harry, we here at Hogwarts need you.

I am not asking you to return to Hogwarts, I will not go that far. But if you will indulge an old man, I would be remiss if I was to say that it is my hope that you will at least consider it. I know we have had our differences this year, but has anything you think I have done to you been unforgivable? Hogwarts and Britain are where you belong Harry, as safe as you may feel in America, you will always be a stranger there. I promise you that you will not be in any further danger inside the castle, and that I will not interfere with whatever summer plans you make, as I know you will be careful, even without my asking.

Another matter, I know from Miss Granger that you have Voldemort's wand, and I cannot urge you enough to destroy it at once. We both know the danger this wand poses to you, and to our society as a whole, it needs to cease to exist. Without his wand, Voldemort will not have his full power at his disposal. The wand chooses the Wizard, as Mr. Ollivander never tires of saying, and our friend cannot easily walk into a wand shop and try them out one by one.

I hope this letter can be the start of a reconnection between us Harry. I am not telling you to do anything, I know I can only ask.....but ask I must, for the good of our society. Please think about what I've said Harry, I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Albus

The owl that had delivered it looked pretty exhausted, and Harry surmised that Dumbledore must have sent the letter soon after The Daily Prophet coverage of Fudge broke. He really needed to get himself a trans-Atlantic trunk floo, Harry thought. Saves a lot of wear and tear on the owls. A month ago Harry and Hedwig had had a sort of conversation, involving Harry asking questions and trying to glean the answers from the hooting, which more or less established that Hedwig didn't care for crossing the ocean if she didn't have to. She was making the Michigan/Oklahoma run twice a week now, and Reiko's parents made sure she was well fed. Dobby and Winky were shuttling back and forth several times a day via the trunk floo, and were proving to be the best 50 galleons a month that Harry could ever have spent.

Harry pondered the letter for a few minutes, idly toying with his sandwich, and then slid the note over to Sophie, who read it, and it journeyed around the table, which included Drew as well. Claudia spoke first:

"Well he's trying, I'll give him that. That's the written equivalent of getting on your knees." Harry smiled faintly at hearing that.

"Yes, he is very trying, I quite agree." He thought of something and starting laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Sophie, I'm just now imaging my reception if I just walked into Hogwarts Great Hall right now and said, 'sorry, I've changed my mind, where's my timetable?'" He was shaking with mirth now, and the others were all smiling now. None of them really thought he would leave though, indeed they were all kind of waiting to see how badly he'd roast Dumbledore merely for asking. Warrick got in the spirit of things.

“Oh yeah, and how many different ways could that Prophet paper call you a quitter? ‘Potter Crawls Back With Tail Between His Legs’”

“It would be classic, and I would never hear the end of it.....even if I wanted to take off, which I do not remotely want to do.” Drew hesitantly broke in, still not being entirely comfortable with group, though he was getting there.

“What about that wand? I’d have thought he’d want it for himself.” Harry started smirking.

“Well if he can’t have it back, and he knows I won’t give it to him, he wants it out of play completely. It’s not a bad notion really, and if it was anyone but me having it, I’d be all for it.”

“Have you played with it yet?”

“Yeah, I went outside last night after Chess. It worked just a bit worse than my normal wand, but I took a long time to get used to that one, so I’m not sure what that tells me. Not many people have two fully compatible me among the not many. I won’t need it for awhile, but it’s nice to have just in case.”

“So you’re not going to join the League, you won’t change your mind?”

“Nope, the next time I set foot in Britain will be next summer, I did promise my friends there a visit.” Left unsaid was that he went to Britain at least once a week, to the shop.....but Drew did not need to know that at this time. The rest of the meal was spent debating whether Harry should either: Rip Dumbledore a new one for rehashing what had already been decided, or just not respond at all. Harry said the least during this debate, though he saw the advantages of both.

All that said, Harry chose the third option. With a few minutes to go in the lunch period, he took out a piece of paper and wrote a quick note to his not so favorite person.

Dear Albus,

Thank you for your kind note, but I am afraid I am disinclined to say yes to any of your requests.

Have a nice day,

Harry

Again, he passed the note around the table, and Jonas succinctly summed up their reaction.

“This is going to confuse the shit out of him, you being polite like this.” Harry got a big smile on his face hearing that.

“I know.” The owl that had delivered Dumbledore’s letter was still hanging around the Owlrey that afternoon after class, so Harry tied his note to its leg and sent him off.

“Take your time, there’s no hurry.” Harry couldn’t help but wonder if he saw a look of relief on the owl’s face, but no matter. Harry had also written a longer letter to the twins, apprising them of the situation. Dobby came back with a quick reply from them that said that this was all news to them, that Dumbledore hadn’t mentioned anything at the Order meeting. This didn’t surprise Harry really, surely the old man was quick enough to figure that the twins were his conduit for Order information, and even if they didn’t, Bill would.

There would be no reply from Dumbledore to Harry’s rebuffing of his requests, and in the coming days, Dumbledore would recede to the back of Harry’s mind.....where he would not fester, but not leave either.

Saturday, October 12, 1996

10 am

Great Lakes Athletic Field

It was Quidditch day at the GLAF, the first game to feature Cortez v. Proctor, with a short lunch break right afterward, then Jefferson v. Shawnee starting at 2 pm. There was no locker room at the field, so teams changed in their dorm rooms and hiked out to the pitch. Harry and Warrick didn't say much to each other this morning about the game.....but they both knew the stakes. With Harry now on board, Cortez was the overwhelming favorite to win the Cup.....which was not quite fair really, since Connor Banks, last year's now graduated Captain and Seeker, had actually caught two of the three Snitches.....though one of them was in a game they were already losing 240-50. Proctor House was technically the defending champions.....or they would be if they hadn't lost all of their championship players that is, so they were more champions in theory. Six had graduated from a veteran squad, and the seventh had made the Quodpot team and wasn't interested in a rebuilding phase for Quidditch. Still, they had the Cup, and the other three Houses were chasing it.

The announcer for the day was Elizabeth Westin, the junior Charms teacher, who won/lost the draw that morning. The teachers drew lots to see who would announce each game, with the caveat that he/she only had to do one game all season. There had nearly been a riot two years earlier when Great Lakes Caretaker Riley Poole had announced a match, though most of the 11 year olds had heard the majority of those words before. Needless to say, he was no longer in the draw, but had been allowed to keep his job after a blistering lecture from Murray and Heyman.

“Welcome one and all to our first match of the Quidditch season! This morning we have Cortez House versus the reigning Quidditch Champions Proctor House! Now let's meet the teams! For Cortez:

“At Keeper, a Freshman from Whitewater, Wisconsin, Jane Abbott!”

“ At Chaser, a Junior from Alice Springs, Oklahoma, Reiko Aylesworth!” Alice Springs' population consisted solely of The Tecumseh Magical Academy, where Reiko's parents were the Charms Department.

“At Chaser, a Novice from Georgetown, Michigan, Billy Amend!”

“At Chaser, a Freshman from Oakdale, Illinois, Kim Cuthbert!”

“At Captain and Beater, a Senior from Minneapolis, Minnesota, John Geyser!”

“At Beater, a Junior from Indianapolis, Indiana, Warrick Forrester!”

“And finally, at Seeker, a Junior from Godric’s Hollow, Wales, Harry Potter!”

The Cortez troops, who had been waiting outside the field, flew into the stadium as their names were called. Warrick got the biggest cheers, he was quite popular around school, and he flew over to the Cortez section to slap hands with people. Harry came in last, and got his own set of cheers. He could see Sophie in the front row of the Cortez cheering section, Jonas’ omnioculars in hand. Westin allowed it to die down a bit, before announcing Proctor.

“And now the defending Champions from Proctor:”

“At Keeper, a Freshman from Grand Rapids, Michigan, Neal Stephenson!”

“At Chaser, a Sophomore from Cuyahoga City, Ohio, Danny Waterhouse!”

“At Chaser, a Novice from Paducah, Kentucky, Elizabeth Zeur!”

“At Chaser, a Junior from Milan, Tennessee, Ike Newton!”

“At Beater, a Freshman from Holt, Michigan, Bobby Shaftoe!”

“At Beater, a Transition from Holt, Michigan, Jack Shaftoe!”

“And at Captain and Seeker, a Junior from Charleston, West Virginia, Ray Elwood!”

The Proctor players, none of which had played a minute last season, all flew out to the cheers of their House.....and pretty much no one else. Warrick's popularity and Harry's 'fame' had the other Houses rooting for Cortez.....the fact that Harry and Warrick were buddies with Jonas pretty much won Jefferson over anyway.

“Our match referee today is Cooper Manning, famed Keeper from the New York Thunderbolts!”

Manning, yes that Manning.....neck injury in college, hah.....gathered the Captains at the center of the field for the usual patter about rules and such. Manning released the balls, and the game was on.

“Cortez with the Quaffle, Aylesworth has it and it charging down the field, the only experienced Chaser in the game.....she shoots..... she scores! 10 points for Cortez!” Reiko threw her arms in the air in celebration.....which repeated itself a minute later, as she stole the Quaffle and passed it to Amend for an easy goal. The Snitch hadn't made an appearance as of yet, but Harry was having fun making mock charges at Keeper Stephenson, disrupting his rhythm and giving Reiko and the others better shots.

The Proctor offense had a hard time getting going though, as Cortez' experienced Beaters made their lives not as much fun as being a spectator would have been. Geyser was about as big as Warrick was, and the two of them were merciless on the young Chasers of Proctor, providing open lanes for Reiko, Billy, and Kim to get their shots in....and that was a bit of a problem, since Billy and Kim really weren't very good shots yet, though they weren't half bad at passing the Quaffle around. Fortunately, Reiko was good enough for the three of them, and Cortez maintained their early lead. No fouls were being committed, as the Proctor Chasers were too busy dodging Bludgers when they were on Defense, and Abbott was playing well enough as Keeper that the Cortez Chasers did not really feel the need to play physical with their counterparts.

After about 15 minutes, the score was 60-20 in favor of Cortez, and the Snitch made its first appearance, right near Abbott in the Cortez goal area. Harry charged off after it, while his Defense classmate Elwood came after him.....and it became readily apparent that Elwood wasn't a great flyer, just a competent one. Harry chased the Snitch for about a minute, before the little golden ball did some trickery and escaped. He looked around and saw that his side had added two more goals to Proctor's one.....and then a few minutes later, the Snitch came buzzing right toward him, he reached out his hand.....nope, not yet, as the little sucker did a 180 and zoomed away toward the crowd, Harry hurtling after it.

“So you want to play eh?”

WHOOSH!

The kids in the Jefferson section front rows quickly ducked their heads as Harry almost barreled into them.....and then again a few seconds later, as Elwood, deciding he had to at least try, clipped the top of the railing, sending him spiraling out of control and out of the stadium. He managed to right himself before hitting the ground, but it was quite a scare, and he took a few minutes to get back into the action.

It was too late though, as the Snitch led Harry on a wild, three minute ride that no rollercoaster could ever replicate. He nearly scared the life out of Abbott as he followed the Snitch through one of the hoops.....being small has a few advantages after all. He finally caught it after the Snitch did it's own, rather harrowing, version of the Wronski Feint, but Harry caught it just in time to pull out of his power dive, the end of his broom just inches from the turf. Westin had pretty much stopped calling the Quaffle action, and was having a fun time describing Harry Potter and the Elusive Snitch.

“And Harry gets the Snitch, narrowly avoiding leaving pieces of himself in the turf, and Cortez wins the game 230-40! That was a great game to start the season with!” The match had lasted just under thirty minutes, much to referee Manning's delight, as he was going to

work the afternoon game as well at his alma mater. American Quidditch League games being played on Sundays, with all six teams in action the next day.

An out of breath Harry landed on the field, with Reiko almost flying into him as she hugged him.

“That was amazing, how’d it feel going through the hoop?”

“Like I’m glad I didn’t have that third pancake this morning.” Warrick, John, and the rest landed now, and they drank in the cheers of the crowd. Harry could easily hear Sophie yelling her head off. Warrick and Reiko embraced, and Warrick started crowing.

“How bout my girl! Eight goals baby!” Harry had been a little busy in the last minutes with the Snitch, but he had seen Warrick and John’s early work in the game.

“Did you wind up unseating anyone?”

“Nah, they’re even smaller than you Harry, they’re hard to hit.” Harry immediately started shaking his head emphatically.

“Uh uh, no way am I giving you more target practice during our workouts, forget it.”

“Aw c’mon, its for the good of the team!” By now the Proctor team had landed, and the two squads shook hands. Elwood was the only one Harry knew, and they had a laugh about their buzz of the Jefferson section.

“I came ‘this’ close to clipping Jonas, but the railing got in the way.”

“Well he should have good enough reflexes to duck shouldn’t he? I almost got him too, maybe the Snitch doesn’t like Quodpot players or something. Where did you wind up?”

“I pulled out of the spin about six feet from the ground, but I was so dizzy I had a hard time getting back in the stadium. I’ll try to give you a better match next year.”

“Good luck with the rest of your games mate.”

The teams and the crowd all hiked back to the Dining Hall for lunch, with many students walking up to Harry and complimenting him for the show. He was enjoying the feeling, it had been about a year since his last real game, and he was already anxious to play the next game, against Jefferson. That game, however, was over seven months away, and outdoor Quidditch practice was pretty much over with until April at the earliest, depending on the weather. In a fit of happiness and relaxation, he told Rick and Terry, who he and Warrick were eating lunch with, about the trunk, and most of its features.....all except the floo. It turns out they had suspected something like that all along, though they had not actually seen anyone come out of it. They each swore that they had never tried to open it, and laughed when Harry said that the trunk is why they never caught he and Sophie at anything. They had their own girlfriends though too, and made liberal use of Silencing Charms on some nights, with the darkness helping things greatly, as none of the dorm rooms had windows to the outside.

The second match was a massacre, as Jefferson whupped Shawnee 300-30, behind 10 goals by Transition sensation Sally Jenkins, last year’s Most Valuable Player in the Quidditch Cup. The game was even shorter than the day’s first one, at just 22 minutes. Shawnee was another squad that had no returning members, and despite their scrimmage work against Cortez, they were badly outmatched. That was a problem for some Quidditch teams over the years, more than a few players were just keeping ready for Quodpot, whose teams were usually made up of the older students. Cortez had not lost anyone this way, but they were the only House to be able to say that. Their four players had all graduated, and the four new players besides Harry, the two starters and two reserves, had all claimed that they were in it for the course.....much as Geyser and Warrick had been. Warrick told Harry that he had been offered Quodpot spots for years, but had never taken the plunge, preferring a sport where he was very

good, rather than one where he would have to work hard just to be acceptable.

Harry and the rest of the team watched the match with great interest, and Abbott in particular wasn't looking forward to a Jenkins onslaught. Geyser, in a great mood because of the morning victory, took much pleasure in telling Abbott all about how Jenkins had rung up 18 goals on them the previous year.....this was the game where then-Seeker Connor Banks had caught the Snitch in a losing effort. Harry privately thought that Wood would have stopped most of her shots, and he had played against her in pickup games during the summer and honestly thought she was no better at Chaser than he was.....he with no training at the position. He inwardly smiled though, when he thought about Ron facing Jenkins, and what it would do to his friend's confidence if he had to face that kind of onslaught. The first Gryffindor Quidditch match was scheduled to occur in two weeks, against Ravenclaw, and Harry was half tempted to go see it, hidden in his Invisibility cloak. He was still chewing on it, and would kick it around with Fred and George the next time he saw them.

The party in Cortez Lounge that night was pretty loud, as it was prank night, a lot of students had been saving their WWW purchases for this weekend. This was likely to be their only celebrating, as Cortez was considered to be a strong candidate to finish last in the Quodpot Cup for the fourth year out of the last six. Their team was mostly made up of Transition and Apprentice Year players, along with a couple of Seniors. Harry stopped short of opening up a portable swamp, but he and Warrick had a fun time doing some Novice tormenting.....all in good fun of course. The party was only for Cortez students, which was a shame because no one liked Novice hazing more than Jonas did. Fred and George had a new product that reversed gravity on a person, which forced them to walk on their hands. It was hidden in chocolate candies, so it was easy to sucker the youngsters into trying it. Other favorites among the kids included gum that grew a person's hair a centimeter with every chew, and Talking Temporary Stick On Tattoos, which lasted anywhere from an hour to a day, depending on what you chose. The talking was all PG rated of course, though the twins hadn't ruled out making the language dirtier if the buyers seemed to want it.

While the mayhem was going on, and Warrick was in full sight of the room, Harry and Sophie slipped off and used some magical glue on Joe Clancy's door.....while he was still inside, having gone in to change his clothes after a Novice student had 'accidentally' thrown up on him, after the young girl had been walking upside down for ten minutes. Scourgify has its issues with vomit. The glue bonded to the door instantly, and, after placing a certain charm, the young couple slipped off before they started laughing too hard. They skipped the rest of the festivities, and adjourned to the trunk. While they were laying there in a heap on the couch:

"You know, this thing is very handy. It sure cuts down on our sneaking around."

"I will admit that having money is very convenient. I never had any to speak of growing up, and at Hogwarts there was no place to spend it, except at Hogsmeade.....but yeah, I'm really glad Peter thought of this." Sophie was glad too, if she ever met Peter she planned to shake his hand.

"You know, you looked good out there today. You should have seen your face while you were chasing the Snitch."

"What did I look like?"

"Pure joy Harry, you really were in your element." He squeezed her a little tighter.

"Oh I'm in my element now Sophie, never fear." She gave him a poke in the ribs.

"You should play professionally Harry, don't become an Auror."

"Okay, if that's what you want." She started laughing.

"Nice try buddy, but you're not that pliable."

"Yet. I'm getting there though, give me time."

“You are easy to train, if only Jonas was that simple to deal with, Claudia would be a lot happier.” Harry hadn’t yet gotten around to talking to her about that, but he had promised Jonas, and however fraught with peril this would be, he had promised. He hadn’t talked to Warrick yet either, figuring to do the easy part first.....Warrick wouldn’t give up his teasing ammunition lightly. This seemed like as good a time as any.

“Um, yeah.....well about that.....you see, it’s like this.....” She loved it when Harry went all weird like this, but it was always a bit confusing to get at what he meant.

“What on earth are you babbling about?”

“Well Jonas and I had a talk last week, and he kind of got across to me that he didn’t really feel that way about Claudia anymore.” This was news to her.

“How did he do that?”

“Well he said it flat out actually. He asked me, nicely, to lay off about Claudia, and I promised him I’d talk to you about it too.”

“Was he serious?”

“He sure seemed to be, I mean you’ve said yourself that they have not yet done anything, after all these years.” Jonas and Claudia had been friends now for about four years total.

Sophie paused for a moment to think.

“Well I did catch them kissing once, though it was under the mistletoe.” Feeling Harry start to scoff, “Hey, I can tell an innocent kiss from one that.....well it lasted about 10 seconds.” That was short as far as Harry was concerned, but he was wise enough not to say that out loud.

“When was this? Did they see you seeing them?”

“Christmas 1994, and no they didn’t.”

“Well that was quite a while ago, and it seems like nothing really took from it. I mean, there comes a time when the ghost has to be given up, right?”

“I guess so.....I guess that’s what Claudia has been saying all along. She’s been saying for years that she’s not ready for a boyfriend, and we’ve all been teasing her about that.”

“Well weren’t you saying the same things? That you weren’t ready for one? Yet nobody was trying to force you into dating someone.” That was a decent point on the surface, but not in one detail.

“Well the difference is that Claudia has always been able to talk to guys, and I haven’t. I mean I could talk to my brothers when I had them, but not boys at school, either muggle or here. Claudia could, and she doesn’t even have any brothers. She has a confidence, you know? And not just about boys. You pegged it that second day, when you said she seemed to be our leader.”

“Sophie, come clean now.....does Claudia have feelings for him?” She hesitated for a second.

“I think she does, yes.....but I wouldn’t be my life on it. I’d bet five dollars though.”

“Well she has waited too long, and I think we should just let it go. Claudia may laugh it off, but I think it’s finally starting to get to Jonas.....heck, I’m tired of it, and I’ve only had to listen to it for two months. All we’re doing is reminding Jonas that Claudia doesn’t think he’s good enough for her.” This brought Sophie up short, she had never thought of it like this.

“You’re right, I never looked at it from his perspective before. I mean, I don’t know what he’s said to Warrick in the past, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard of him complaining about it.”

“Well he has now, and I vote that we respect his wishes. All those in favor, say aye. Aye.” She just shook her head, smiling.

“Aye. What are we going to do about Warrick and Reiko? Should we talk to them?”

“I don’t know, I’m of two minds about that one. Part of me says that we should let Jonas talk to Warrick like he did me, the other part thinks we should help him out and do it for him. The more we’re talking about this the more sympathy I have for the guy.”

“I think we should give it another day, let’s wait until after the games tomorrow, just in case Warrick decides to get some shots in beforehand.” What the heck, Harry thought, one more day wouldn’t make much of a difference.

“Fair enough, that makes sense. And don’t get any ideas about setting her up with Drew either, now that you’ve given up on the Jonas idea.” Sophie started giggling.

“No Harry, I was not going to say that. I don’t think they fit well together, Drew and Claudia.....actually, I think Claudia kind of intimidates him.” Yes she did, thought Harry, and he knew that while Drew didn’t dislike Claudia, he wasn’t 100 percent fond of her either. They had spoken a little on this at their Wizard Chess game last week.

“Let’s not fix her up at all, and allow her to set her own pace there. I think everyone will benefit from the quiet on that front.” Sophie agreed, and the two of them set an example by ceasing to talk for a good long while.

Sunday, October 13, 1996

9:00 am

Joe Clancy had needed a new door that morning, after he had to use Reducto multiple times to get out of his room, it turned out that he had not gone in to change, but to retire for the night. He immediately marched down to Heyman's office to demand an investigation. Heyman was no dummy, and suspected what had happened, though he doubted he would be able to prove anything. It wasn't lost on him that Clancy provoked a lot of these incidents, what with his condescending style and arrogant manner. It was worth noting that no one had actually physically assaulted him as of yet, and as much as Heyman gently mocked Warrick publicly and privately, he was mildly impressed that the larger boy had held back from what he likely dearly wanted to do. Heyman's great fear though, is that Clancy would do more to provoke Harry, who the Deputy Headmaster thought was more likely to pop him than Warrick was. Murray had told him all about the Potter/Draco Malfoy rivalry, with information gotten from Professor Hill back at Hogwarts. He thought it unlikely that Harry would put up with someone like that again, and was a young man who wouldn't rule out violence to settle his problems..

"Joe, I think you should just let this lie, and have a chuckle about it. Someone was playing a prank on you, and it worked. They were trying to get you worked up like this." Clancy was a very tall, reed thin fellow, with pale skin that somewhat resembled Snape's. He was proficient most in the non-wand classes, indeed, he had declined to continue with Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration, preferring to concentrate on the others: Arithmancy, Potions, Ancient Runes, Astronomy, and Herbology, the only one in the NEWT years to have that combination.

"My door was somehow sealed shut, and I had to destroy it to leave my room this morning. If this goes unchecked, who knows what will come next."

"Joe, you are not very popular in Cortez House, and you do not seem to mind this. You have to know that there is a price to pay for that." Heyman had tried the tack a few times before, with about the same success that he was having here.

"At least find out who do it."

“So you can get revenge?” Clancy didn’t deny this.

“So I can know who is after me, and prepare accordingly.” Well there was no harm in that.

“All right Joe, I’ll take a look at the door. Let’s go.” The two of them walked upstairs to the fourth floor and Cortez. As they got there, they passed by the Cortez Quodpot team on their way to the stadium. As it happened, none of them were junior year students, Harry, Reiko, and Warrick being the only athletes in that class. Breakfast had just ended, and a few students were congregating in the Lounge, some just waiting for the game to start, but most had heard the destruction of the door, and were waiting to see what happened.

Heyman went to the door, which was laying on the ground in about five pieces. He examined the frame, and found exactly.....nothing. He scanned it for any spells, and again found nothing. Clancy was standing behind him, growing more frustrated by the beat.

“There’s nothing here Joe, they either erased their tracks while you were gone, or you destroyed the evidence with your barrage.”

“Check Forrester’s wand then, you know he did it, either that or his new buddy Potter.”

“No I don’t know that Joe, and this does not warrant a full inquiry. Keep in mind also that if Forrester had not made friends with Harry, you would not have a room to yourself. Now, I’ll have Raffles send an elf to come fix your door, just sit tight for a few minutes.” This was a new tack for Heyman, not backing Clancy, and the younger man wasn’t liking it.

“Forrester is responsible, he’s trying to provoke me into something.”

“No I’m not you dick. I had nothing to do with.....whatever the heck happened here.” Warrick himself was now walking out of his room next door, Harry right behind him. He looked disgustedly at his former

roommate, having heard most of the talk. Heyman figured he should at least ask.

“Warrick, you had nothing to do with this?”

“No I did not Professor Heyman, though I’m glad I wasn’t still asleep what with all the noise going on next door.” To prove himself, he offered his wand to Heyman, handle first.

“Feel free to check it if you want to.” He motioned to Harry, who did the same.

“Same here, you can check my wand too if you want to.” Heyman mentally debated for a second, were they bluffing or not.....but figured the best way to calm Clancy down was to check them. He took Harry’s first, and did a check of it.....and the spells that came out would have been useless in this case, mostly Silencing Spells and Transfiguration Spells that he had been practicing. Likewise Warrick’s wand proved to be innocent as well. After handing them back, Heyman looked at Clancy.

“Satisfied Joe?” The boy certainly did not look especially satisfied, but he knew when he was beaten.

“Fine, maybe it was someone else then.” This had a notable lack of sincerity attached to it, but he said nothing else. Warrick and Harry nodded politely at Heyman and walked off, and only started smiling when their backs were turned. They waited until they got to the Lounge to say anything

“Good thing it was Sophie who removed the glue and the Listening Charm.” The Listening Charm had been put there so they could not only hear the fireworks, but, if possible, send someone up to erase any evidence.

“Yes, my lady was on the ball wasn’t she? Nice trick with the wand, offering it to Heyman.”

“I thought for a second that he wouldn’t even check it, I guess he did it to shut Clancy up.”

“Oh man, the look on his face.” They started laughing as the girls came up to them. Reiko lightly swatted her boyfriend on the back of his head, but was grinning.

“I guess it worked.” Harry looked behind them, Heyman was just now coming into the Lounge, and the Deputy Headmaster did not even give the foursome a second glance as he left the room. Clancy followed a few minutes later, as his door was apparently now fixed. He walked right up to them, figuring that they wouldn’t do anything to him with this many witnesses.

“I know it was one of you.”

“You need to calm down Joe, so you had some trouble leaving your room, hardly worth this much trouble.”

“Oh shut up Potter, you may think you’re some badass, but you’re just a punk who thinks he’s bigger than he is.” Harry just fixed him with a half smile, he had heard this kind of crap before.....only this idiot didn’t have Crabbe and Goyle to protect him. He spoke softly, so that only the five of them could hear him.

“Don’t do this Joe, don’t take us on. There’s no possible way you can win, and we will make you look bad while losing. Don’t do it.”

“Are you threatening me Potter?”

“No, I’m just telling you what will happen if you make trouble for us like you just did, being a tattletale, with no proof to boot. You leave well enough alone, and so will we, that’s the deal on the table. A smart man would take it.”

Clancy showed what he thought of the deal by turning his back and walking away, with as much dignity as he could muster. Reiko looked at Harry thoughtfully, but with a grin.

“I’m really glad I’m your friend Harry, I wouldn’t want you talking to me that way.” Harry grinned back.

“I never will Reiko, don’t worry. I think he got the message though.” Warrick had a mock evil look on his face at that moment.

“The only trouble is, we’re not going to hold up our end of the bargain, are we?”

“Well he never agreed to the deal now did he? So we’re not obligated to forgo our fun at his expense. We’ll get him again tonight after the games.” Clancy had been spotted at the Quidditch games the day before, so he would be going again today probably.....even jerks are allowed to like sports, and indeed Clancy was a big Quodpot fan.

The four of them met Claudia downstairs, and they toddled off to the game.

The order of the games was reversed this morning, so Shawnee was playing Jefferson. This would be Harry’s first Quodpot game, and while he had watched a couple of the Cortez practices, he still had trouble imagining an entire game of it. There did not appear to be a ‘Quodpot Through the Ages’ kind of book for him to read, and Quidditch Through the Ages devoted just a couple of paragraphs to it. Still, the game was the number one sport in Wizard America, and was steadily gaining ground on Quidditch in Canada, Central America, and South America as well. The Quodpot World Cup had been held last year outside Colon, Panama, and attendance had never been higher, with The United States defeating Suriname handily in the final. The best European finish was San Marino, who had been eliminated in the Round of Eight.

How Quodpot was set up was this: There were 11 players on each side, all of them Quod handling players, with no Keeper. The Quod was a modified Quaffle, that looked more like a soccer ball than what the Quidditch people used, and it was charmed to explode at random times.....sometimes it exploded after five seconds, some after five minutes. The school record was nine minutes, and had happened

over 20 years earlier. The 11 players were spread all over the air in soccer style formations, with a smallish cauldron at each end, with a barrier surrounding it, allowing no player to get within a three meter radius of it, hence, no Keepers. The idea was for teams to pass the Quod around the air and get it into the opposing team's cauldron.....all before the Quod exploded, when that happened, the team that did so was awarded a point. When the Quod exploded, and there was absolutely no warning when it did, the player who touched it last was sent off the field, unless the referee declared that it was a legitimate shot on goal, then the player was not sent off, and a new Quod brought out. The exploding stung a little bit, but all players wore magically enhanced goggles, so none of the remains of the ball hit anything vital.

The game lasted one hour, or when a team reached 10 goals, which ever happened last.....or when a team ran out of players, and that team could still lose even if it was ahead in goals, as the other team would have the rest of the game to score. This was to avoid slowdown type games, as was the rule that each team had to have at least one goal every 15 minutes, or the other team was awarded a goal by default. So fortune did not favor the meek in Quodpot, and the games were generally very fast affairs, and the average winning score was somewhere around 30 at school games, and 20 or so in professional games, where the players played better defense.

The stands were packed full this day, as everyone from school was attending, as well as hundreds of alumni and other interested parties. The announcer for this game was John Ryan, the senior Potions teacher. He was an older man, another former Auror whose side passion had always been Potions. After 10 years in Auror Command, he quit to pursue his real love. He in fact was not at all pasty either, rumor had it he spent his weekends on the beach in Florida, where he usually came back with a nice tan, grading essays amidst the sands.

“Welcome one and all to the first Quodpot game of the season! This morning we have Shawnee House taking on the defending champion Jefferson!” Ryan introduced the teams, Jonas was playing something called Center Midfield, and the celebrity referee was Don Frey of the

Milwaukee Dragons of the professional league, a graduate of Salem five years earlier.

“And the Quod is up, Harris of Jefferson grabs it, passes it to Jonas Steele, who charges up the field.....no, he flips it to Hailey, Hailey shoots.....no, it bangs off the top of the cauldron, Anderson of Shawnee grabs the rebound and sends it up the field.” The teams were cold first three minutes, and the Quod had not exploded yet, until:

“Weaver takes the Quod for Shawnee, he looks to pass up field, but no one is open.....”

BOOM!

Weaver got showered with Quod remains, and dejectedly flew to the ground, it had been the first time all game he got to handle the Quod. A new Quod was brought out of the special barrel holding them, and Jefferson took it over. Jonas was like a laser with his passing, which was his major strength, and Jefferson soon took advantage:

“Bouton passes to Steele, who makes another rush at the goal, he’s approaching the barrier, he shoots.....no, he passes to Hailey, and Hailey shoots.....he scores! Jefferson goes up 1-0 on a goal by Senior forward Art Hailey.” Hailey raised his arms, and the Jefferson crowd was yelling even louder than before.

“Shawnee takes the Quod, Malina to Rydell, say hi to your granddad for me Jeff.” Jeff Rydell’s grandfather had preceded Murray as the Head of the school. “Rydell shoots.....no, it’s snatched out of the air by Bouton, he whips a long pass up field to MacFadyen...who flies right over the goal and drops it in perfectly, goal for Jefferson!” Angus MacFadyen, whose grandparents were Scottish natives who had graduated from Hogwarts, scored his first goal in two years, having been shut out the previous year.

Shawnee eventually went down 6-0 and another Quod exploding, before they got their first goal, but their joy was short lived as Jonas scored back to back goals, though in between Jefferson had a person

sent off with a face full of Quod. Then Shawnee caught their, well their first wind, and rattled off three goals out of the next four, putting the score at 8-4. The Shawnee crowd, tantalized by three second place finishes in a row in the Quodpot Cup, started chanting:

“Our Year! Our Year!”

The Jefferson team didn't really appreciate that, and Jonas and Bouton started preying on Shawnee's better offensive players with a fury, stealing the Quod time after time, leading to easy goals by Bouton and Hailey, the two Senior stars on the team. No other squad had a top threesome even remotely as talented as Jefferson did with Bouton, Hailey, and Jonas, and it was showing, as the Jefferson lead inexorably went higher and higher.

The game got a little bit interesting just after the halfway point, when Jefferson had three players sent off in a four minute span, allowing Shawnee to get the score back to 24-10.....but that was to be their highlight of the match, as Jefferson did everything they could to force Shawnee to hold the Quod as long as possible, with more Quods in the face resulting. The Shawnee fans stayed into it until the bitter end, and did not let the Jefferson cheering squad drown them out, at least avoiding that defeat. At the end of the game, Ryan was hoarse, as he announced the final.

“And the final bell sounds, and Jefferson defeats Shawnee by a score of 34-12! Four Jefferson players are left on the field to two for Shawnee. Art Hailey and Jim Bouton share the scoring honors with nine goals apiece, with Jonas Steele notching seventeen assists to go with four goals of his own.” Jefferson was going ballistic in the stands, and Murray in particular had a large smile on her face in the faculty area.....she was a 1971 graduate of Jefferson. In the Cortez section, Warrick turned to Harry, as everyone started heading for the exits.

“So what did you think of your first Quodpot game?”

“It was interesting, probably easier to watch than Quidditch, since you only have to follow one ball. You sure you don’t want to go out for the team next year? You were really into it.”

“It’s fun to be a spectator for it, but I don’t really like playing it. You looked like you were having fun.”

“It was a blast, Jonas was amazing, I’ve never seen Quidditch players pass that well, and our ball is a lot easier to grab than the Quod.”

“Yeah, our boy is going to make a lot of money in two years. The Quodpot World Cup is only three years away, he’ll be playing in it.” They got to the main gates, and looked back and saw Jonas surrounded by his Quod groupies, all of whom were vying for his attention.....him being the only star player who was single. Harry thought the gang had been exaggerating that in their stories, but they had actually kind of downplayed it. Lunch was fun, with the highlight being Claudia standing up and singing Jonas’ favorite song, Train in Vain, by The Clash. This was the result of a bet made the week before, though Claudia had a 15 goal handicap, all to no avail.

The second match of the day could charitably be called a debacle for Cortez, as they lost 23-3 to Proctor, many of whose very happy fans could be heard chanting:

“Too bad Potter can’t play Quodpot too!”

Harry heard enough of this that he was moved, in the middle of the action, to put Sonorus on his throat and shoot back.

“Just give me time folks!”

The Cortez faithful started howling with laughter at that, and started cheering their team on all the louder, even as the game got further and further out of reach. At the one hour mark, Cortez was down to six players, and Proctor had four.....as well as the victory. Proctor did not rub it in too much as everyone left the stadium, and the Cortez kids were safe in the knowledge that they had a crappy team and that

there was nothing they could do about it. Jefferson was the most pleased, they were the only House to have won both their games over the weekend, and were in first place in both Quidditch and Quodpot.

Harry, Warrick, Reiko, and Sophie wandered back to the main building, collecting Claudia along the way, figuring to go into the trunk to plan the next Joe Clancy mission. They looked for Jonas, but couldn't find him as they walked indoors. They decided to go up to Jefferson, perhaps he had gotten there ahead of them. Along the way, they mused about diversifying their target list. Reiko was interested in maybe pranking Poole, the Caretaker. Claudia put the kibosh on that one.

“Uh uh, no way. He's considered a member of the faculty, if we get him, they will investigate a lot harder than they would a student, even if what we do is benign.”

“Then we have to do something not easy to trace, something that doesn't use any WWW products, something simple, elegant.” They argued about this for a couple more minutes, as they reached the Jefferson Lounge.....at just the same time Drew did, coming from down the hall, there was more than one stairwell.

“Hey guys, looking for Jonas?” They nodded.

“Come on in, he's probably in the Lounge or in our room.” He opened the door, and they walked in after him. The Lounge was just filling up with kids returning from the game, and Jonas did not appear to be in the room. Drew hadn't sat with him, so he wasn't sure where he would be. They followed him down to his and Jonas' room, and Drew waved his hand in front of the door, and it silently came open. He walked in without really looking, and the others followed him.....and what they saw:

Jonas and his girl had removed clothes, but not bothered to let the curtain down. Jonas looked up only when everyone gasped. He was more than a little surprised, as was his girl.....who Harry vaguely

knew as a Proctor from his and Warrick's Transfiguration class. She was the first one to say anything actually.

"Would you people mind leaving us alone?" Harry and friends immediately filed out the door, as Drew very calmly used his wand and pulled down the curtain on Jonas' bed, and stuck a Silencing Charm on the bed to boot. He grabbed some homework materials from his desk, and walked nonchalantly out of the room.

Once out in the hallway, they all stood there, a bit embarrassed. Claudia had a tightlipped smile on her face that greatly reminded Harry of McGonagall, though he chose not to mention this comparison out loud. Warrick, as usual, broke the ice.

"Gosh, that was awkward. Lovely day outside, wasn't it Drew?" Drew was always walking in on various roommates and their girls, so he was more casual about it than anyone.

"It sure was, a nice day to play Quodpot, yes definitely." Harry got in on it, as they slowly walked back down the hall.

"I wonder what we'll be having for dinner, I'd love some lasagna I think." Drew saw one of his other roommates coming at them in the hall, he discreetly waved him off, and he did a 180. He continued.

"You never know with the elves, one week a couple of years ago they got all strange on us and served hamburgers for 12 meals straight, you remember that Sophie?"

"I do, Murray had to beg them to change the menu. Reiko, do you remember what set them off?"

"I don't think the faculty ever told us did they? Claudia, do you remember?"

"I'm fine Reiko, we can all stop pretending, though you were all doing a nice job of it. Jonas is single and free to do what he wants. I have no hold over him." Her voice was very tight, but it was perfectly clear that she wasn't crying. Harry agreed with everything she was

saying, though it wasn't apparent that anyone else did too. He decided to end the awkwardness.

"C'mon mates, let's get out of here. Jonas will join us when he's ready." Aside from Drew, for obvious reasons, they all split up to respective rooms for a time, and met up again at dinner. Jonas, to his credit, did not act the least bit ashamed of what he had done. Nobody really froze him out, and even Claudia chatted with him for a bit, though not as much as she normally did.

Between the incident and the meal, Harry and Warrick had a long talk about Jonas' wishes on the teasing subject, and his non-feelings about Claudia. Warrick was a bit torn, feeling that his loyalty might be being stretched. Just because Jonas had been the only other guy in their group for so long, did not mean that Warrick saw him as his best friend. While he had never technically used that label out loud, he had always thought of Reiko that way, even before their feelings developed. Harry did his best to calm him. It was strange for him too, as he spent about the same amount of time with both Jonas and Claudia, and spent much more with Sophie, Warrick, and Reiko.

"Don't worry, Claudia won't force him out over this, you just watch."

"How can you be so sure Harry?"

"Because if she does, it will show that it has gotten under her skin, and I'm betting she'll cut her left pinky off before she let's that happen."

"Where would you stand if she tried?"

"Warrick mate, Jonas did nothing wrong, other than not closing the curtain.....that was as close as I've come to seeing a porn film. He is single and can do what he wants, so yeah, that's where I come out in this."

"Sophie's with you?"

"Well she was before we saw all that, now, I don't know."

“Well Reiko will kill me for saying this, but I agree with you.” There was a knock on the door, and Sophie and Reiko came in seconds later. They wound up agreeing that Claudia was not likely to push the matter, and that they would do everything they could to smooth things over if she did. Jonas was not around after dinner, because of the party Jefferson was throwing to celebrate their dual wins this weekend.....Cortez had theirs a day early, knowing they wouldn't need one on Sunday. They left Clancy alone that night, Harry had scanned his door and found multiple alarm and surveillance charms.....fortunately Harry and Sophie were under his Invisibility Cloak, having suspected something like this. They would have to wait for a better moment, when they had him in the open.

Claudia did not press anything, though she stopped spending any time alone with Jonas.....who was not in fact dating the girl they caught him with, her name was Karen Bosworth by the way, and Harry and Warrick had dutifully ignored her in Transfiguration the next day. Other than that though, things stayed relatively normal for our players, who were all anxiously awaiting their Flackter Alley day on Saturday.

Saturday, October 19, 1996

Great Lakes Dining Hall

10:00 am

The first of the Flackter Alley days was now upon them, and today was the day for the upperclassmen to go. At Great Lakes the only the eldest four years were permitted to leave campus on these weekends, the school not trusting the younger three years to be let loose in muggle Milwaukee. The school was big enough, at about 335 students total and 190 or so eligible for Flackter Alley visits, to need two days to get them all in. So Harry and his fellow Juniors, and the Seniors were to go today, with the Apprentice and Transition students to go the next day. Exceptions were made on a case by case basis, but there usually weren't many requested.

Murray looked at the assembled students, all 101 of them. She was always nervous on days like this, it only took one incident to get them into trouble.

“Remember the rules, no underage magic is to be used in Flackter Alley, and no magic of any kind is to be used in muggle Milwaukee unless your lives are in peril, that means you Seniors. Everyone is to be back at the portkey point by 5:30 pm, no exceptions. Any questions?”

There were no questions, as everyone was anxious to get going. Two teachers were going along too, in part to man the portkey point, in part to be there in case of emergencies. There weren't to be any official chaperones on this trip, though there would be the next day. The kids going today were all veterans of two or three years of Flackter visits, not counting summertime, and it was figured that if they couldn't be trusted, who could? Plus, if there were incidents, then the next trip, in middle December, would be in jeopardy. That was Christmas shopping season, and no one wanted to miss that.

The kids gathered in groups of five or six around the portkeys, and one by one, the popped away. The teachers had gone first, and shuffled the groups quickly out of the portkey point, which was right near the gateway to muggle Milwaukee. This wasn't like the summer trip, so there wasn't a ball bat to hang on to or anything, the return portkeys were in the hands of the teachers. Like many of the students, the sextet headed for the bank, saying goodbye to Drew in the process. He was going right to Milwaukee proper to spend the day with his father.

Sophie and Claudia, who both came from problem families, got a specific amount of spending money for each Flackter Alley visit, because of their scholarships. Claudia's family could redefine the term 'dysfunctional', and due to their instability, the American Ministry had authorized them to be Obliviated of Claudia's magical ability and her exact whereabouts during the school year. They still sent her the occasional letter via the muggle mail drop, but it was not a close relationship. Harry knew all about these kinds of families, and to himself, speculated that a lot of Claudia's relationship hang-ups came from her parents. Likewise, there were Listening charms all over

Sophie's parents' house, just in case they got loose lipped.....though they had not as of yet, and Sophie was unwilling to have them Obliviated, she wanted them to love her for what she was, not for what she was pretending to be. Claudia had had no say, as her parents' behavior had caused a few incidents even during her Novice year.

Jonas had wealthy parents back in Chicago, and Reiko was fine too, as teachers in the Wizard world made very nice salaries. Warrick had finally fessed up to Harry that his uncle played for the Indiana Pacers basketball team, and was always slipping him money, even though Warrick's parents were unwilling to take the same.....his father was a wandmaker, his mother worked for the muggle municipal government in Indianapolis. His uncle hadn't been willing to front the cost of a trunk like Harry's though, Warrick had told him laughingly. There was only so much fat on the calf apparently. He promised to take Harry to a game during the Christmas Break.

After the kids got their money, they wandered around for a time, showing Harry a bit more of Flackter Alley than he had seen before. It was somewhat like Diagon Alley in the composition of the shops, though it was more spread out. Harry had his eye on a couple of places that would be perfect for another WWW store, if Fred and George ever decided to expand over here. There were no books to buy this time, and all their supplies were kept up to date by Dobby and Winky, who had been happy to go to the Apothecary for Warrick and Reiko, or to the Stationary Store for Claudia. Most other students didn't have this luxury though, and these stores and more got a healthy business, as they would the next day as well.

The one store they did need to go to was to get Harry a set of dress robes. He had shot up a whole inch over the last few months, and his robes were showing a bit too much sock. He chalked it up to a lower stress level than in years past, as well as a month less of the Dursleys and not being starved half to death.....as he had eaten well since the day he hired Dobby, and could send out for food. Sophie was insisting, and Harry knew better than to argue.....though he still tried, if only to keep the illusion that he had a say in things like this.

“Do I have a choice in this?” She grabbed his arm and yanked him along.

“Not really, no. Hey, look at the bright side, it’s better than a poke in the eye.”

“How much better?” Men, Sophie thought. But for all of Harry’s leadership abilities in battle, he knew that he was better off picking his battles and saving chits for the big ones.....though there had been no big ones as of yet.....thank goodness.

They entered The Playground, the new Wizard fashion shop that had opened up in the fall, with Harry threatening full pranking retaliation to the girls if they kept him in there more than 15 minutes. They took him half seriously, and only had him being pinned and measured for about 20 minutes or so. The three women, with Jonas and Warrick mocking Harry all the way, decided that purple was a great color for him, and forced him to order his dress robes in that color. Harry really didn’t care that much either way, and for fun, also ordered a robe in fluorescent green, just to have some fun with it all. After making arrangements to pick the robes up at the end of the afternoon, they went back up toward the gateway.

The original thinking was that they would split up for lunch, the two couples going off by themselves, and Jonas and Claudia going somewhere.....but last weeks’ events had cast a pall on that plan. The two were perfectly nice to each other, but there seemed to a warmth barrier between them.....and we’re not talking about a magical barrier either. They all decided to go to a Mexican place that Drew, who had grown up in Milwaukee, had recommended to them. It was near a Halloween Costume Shop, and they all had stuff to buy for the big party that was less than two weeks away now.

Once done eating the delicious food.....the elves weren’t big on trying interesting dishes to cook, they knew they were cooking for the masses.....they decided to save the Costume Shop for last, as they didn’t want to carry things around if they didn’t have to, and Harry had no interest in being caught using his wand. The girls went into a muggle fashion boutique, and the boys made straight for a video

arcade.....cliché yes, but fun was had by all in spite of it. On the way over to a record store, Harry made a point of walking next to Reiko.

“Did you do it?”

“I got you, you’ll be squared away on our next visit.” Harry had asked Reiko to watch Sophie, to see if there was anything that really grabbed her. If so, he’d be paying a visit there during the next trip, to get it for her for Christmas.

They spent a couple of hours in the record store, which sold mostly used CD’s and a lot of imports and bootlegs, and had a bunch of listening stations to sample songs. Harry’s ignorance of muggle music was highlighted as he hadn’t heard of most of these bands, so he stuck with ones he had heard of. He had a stereo rigged up in the trunk, and Warrick had done some kind of mishmash to get it to play correctly, despite the magic. After wandering around for awhile, window shopping, it was getting on to 3:30 pm, and they adjourned to the Halloween Shop.

Harry and Sophie had been debating on what to go as, they wanted to do something either romantic, or funny.....or romantically funny. Reiko and Warrick always went for the funny, and quickly picked out matching superhero outfits. She was going as Storm, from the X-Men comics, and he was going to be Batman.....well they were matching in that they were both comic book superheroes anyway. Jonas had a thing for American football, so he bought a Packers jersey and helmet from the sporting goods store next door, he would be a magical Brett Favre for a night. Claudia made a joke of her tallness, and got a costume that showed her off as a living Statue of Liberty. Sophie was despairing of finding anything for the two of them, when she saw the perfect thing in the corner.....when she was a girl, she had loved a comic strip called Calvin and Hobbes, and the costume in the corner was an unlicensed Calvin and Hobbes kit. Guess who gets to play Hobbes?

Yep, Harry was short, but he still had Sophie by three inches, so he was told that he was going in the tiger suit, while her outfit was one of

Calvin's t-shirts and a pair of shorts like he was drawn in. Sophie's own brown hair would be turned blond and spiky for the event. This was another Americanism that Harry wasn't familiar with, beyond a recollection that Sophie had told him about the comic strip. She remedied that by excusing the two of them for a few minutes, as they went up the block to a bookstore, and Harry was instructed to buy one of the books.....and he did her better by purchasing the whole set.

"You can borrow them whenever you want, I'm sure they're great."

"They are, you'll wonder where they've been all your life."

"I've had that feeling a lot these last few months." They squeezed hands tightly, and went back to join the others, with Harry fully loaded down with shopping bags. They went back into Flackter Alley, and after Harry gratefully shrunk all of their packages, they picked up Harry's robes. They had 20 minutes to kill, but Harry had one place he wanted to go. Drew had just gotten in, and they collected him to come along.

"I want to go into that Magical Objects Shop over there and get myself a pensieve."

"I thought you were going to have the twins get you one?"

"Well they're kind of busy lately Drew, and I'm assuming they're shadowed in some way, either by Dumbledore, The Ministry, or the bad folk. I don't want any of those groups to think that the twins have a pensieve, because the next logical step is that they bought it for me. Besides, they do a lot of stuff for me, I can do this little bitty thing."

They headed straight for the shop, and 10 minutes later, Harry was the proud owner of a medium sized pensieve.....which he didn't take on the portkey back, he had Dobby come fetch it. Right before the portkey left, Harry was feeling satisfied about his last purchase.

"Now you guys can see some of my adventures back over there. I'm sure you'll love the Dementors."

“I’m sure I won’t Harry, but thank you for thinking of us.”

“Anytime Claudia, I’m always here to help.”

Thursday, October 24, 1996

10:30 am

Cortez Lounge

This was Harry’s off morning, and he was on the computer writing his Muggle Studies term paper, due Thanksgiving Wednesday. The 20 page paper dealt with a mythical run for the muggle Presidency by his ‘perfect’ candidate. This was his third go round with it, and he was up to 11 pages when he felt a tug on his sleeve.....it was an ashen faced Dobby.

“No ‘pop’ this time, that was a nice job sneaking up on me.....” He trailed off, Dobby’s eyes were even wider than usual, if that’s possible.

“Harry, you must come with me now.” The last time he’d heard this line, the twins had been visiting.

“Fred and George are here? Isn’t the shop still open?”

“No Harry, we must go to Professor Murray’s office, this is very important.” Harry shrugged, and saved his material from the computer, pocketing the disk. They went downstairs to the third floor and the Headmistresses office. Harry didn’t ask any questions of his small friend, figuring that if Dobby wanted to tell him, he would do it without him asking. Once there, Harry knocked on the door, and were bade to enter.

“Good morning ma’am.”

“Good morning Harry, what can I do for you?” He looked at Dobby.

“Umm.....good question ma'am. Dobby has something to share with us, I guess he wanted you to hear it at the same time I did.”

“Have a seat, both of you.” They did, and Dobby nervously cleared his throat, scooting up in his chair.

“Harry, Professor.....this morning Winky and I were in Flackter Alley, doing some food shopping. While we were walking toward the grocer, we heard a man speaking, and he sounded very out of place.” Harry and Murray were both staring at each other in confusion, where was this going? Dobby answered it now.

“The strange part of it Harry, is that he talked like you.....just like you.” Oh boy, Harry knew this wouldn't be good.

“You don't just mean with an English accent, do you?”

“His accent was just like yours Harry, from Surrey.” How Dobby knew a Surrey accent from any other was a bit of a mystery, but he certainly sounded sure of it. Murray saw her student go a bit pale.

“Harry, you look worried, what's going on?” Harry had to think for a moment.

“Dobby, what did this man look like?” Dobby could do better than a verbal description.

“Winky had a pencil in her pocket, and she used the back of our shopping list to draw him. And Harry, when I got a good look at him, I recognized him. He was a visitor to Malfoy Manor many times, though I do not know his name.” He took the slip of paper out of his pocket, and handed it to Murray first. She waved her wand and enlarged the photo to triple it's size, a nifty spell that didn't impinge on the photo's clarity.

“This is pretty good, I remember you telling me that one of your elves can draw.....do you recognize him Harry?”

He looked at the picture, it was a pretty detailed likeness indeed. It looked very familiar, not that he knew the man, but a relative.....wham, it came upon him.

“This looks like one of my former classmates at Hogwarts, Gregory Goyle. His father was Death Eater implicated, but he was not in on the Department of Mysteries fiasco.....and while his son didn’t talk much at school, he has the brains of a dead fish, he did talk like he was from Surrey. I don’t think I would have put it together if not for the picture, and Dobby saying he had seen him before. Surrey kids weren’t all over the place at Hogwarts, but Goyle and I weren’t the only ones.”

“You’re sure about this?” Harry scratched his head for a second.

“No ma’am, not with 100 percent certainty, I’ve never actually laid eyes on the man I don’t think.....maybe at King’s Cross a time or two, but nothing that stands out. But that picture looks an awful lot like Goyle Jr. Plus, the Goyles are very thick with the Malfoys.” Murray contemplated this for a moment.

“Dobby, where did you see this man?”

“Outside the Apothecary.”

“Have you seen him before?”

“I cannot remember ma’am, though I have not heard speech like Harry’s here in America before, except for on the television.”

“Who was he talking to?”

“No one ma’am, he seemed to be muttering to himself. He was not talking to anyone that I could see, or into one of those mirrors, like Harry had.” Murray rose out of her chair, and threw some floo powder in the fireplace.

“Mitchell Baylor!” Within a few seconds, Baylor’s face was in the fire.

“Joanne, a pleasure. What can I do for you?”

“I need you to come over here for a minute, do you have some time now?”

“Just give me a minute, I’ll be right over.” It was three minutes actually, and then he came tumbling out. Mitchell Baylor was 46 years old, just over six feet tall, with a muscular build.....and looked very much like his youngest son, Drew.....his two other children, both daughters, had already graduated from Great Lakes. He brushed himself off, and turned toward the others. He knew who Harry was, but waited to be introduced.

“Mitchell, this is Harry Potter, and his house elf Dobby.”

“Harry Potter, pleased to meet you, Drew’s told me all about you.” They shook hands, and Baylor politely said hello to Dobby as well.

“Pleased to meet you too sir, and belated thanks for teaching him that Pulse spell.” Mitchell had an easy smile.

“Yes, he said that you got some good use out of it at your brouhaha back in England. Now I gather that there’s more to this meeting than an introduction to a future colleague.” At Murray’s signal, Dobby repeated his spiel from before, sounding less nervous, but no less sure of his findings.

“Well, well..... I can’t say I’m especially surprised Harry. If this Voldemort character is as smart as we’ve heard, he would have set up some kind of long-term surveillance on you. The Kindred play is still going well, but he would have wanted a Wizard in there too. He would want someone relatively expendable, which fits your description of the man.”

Once a week, Harry muggle mailed a fake diary of his outdoor movements to Mark Frankel in Chicago, who then edited them down to a single page to mail to Voldemort. There had been no indication

that the bad man was on to them yet, and Harry had actually had a fun time 're-imagining' his Flackter Alley trip the previous weekend.

"What can we do about it?"

"Well that's the rub really, being a Dark Wizard isn't technically against the law here, you actually have to be doing things that would jeopardize the secret of our existence from the muggles, or helping our enemies. Dark Wizards here don't do that, they're just as invested in our system as we are. Harry, you didn't notice anyone following you last week in Milwaukee?"

"No, but in muggle Milwaukee I wasn't really checking. We didn't spend a lot of time in Flackter Alley, but I'm pretty sure I wasn't followed then."

"You checked yourself for tracking charms and the like?"

"A couple of times in Flackter, and again before we took the portkey home. I didn't find any on me." Baylor thought, and checked his watch a moment.

"Well let me head back to the office a second and contact your British Aurors Harry, if this Goyle is wanted for any crimes there, we can pick him up for that."

"You think he'll be easy to find?"

"Dobby, did you or your friend get any sense that this man was aware that you were watching him."

"No sir, it took Winky a couple of minutes to do her sketch, and he never even looked at us."

"Good, then we take him quickly and easily. I'm sure he's watchful, but if he's a dullard like you say his son is, then I'm not too worried. Excuse me, I'll be right back." He went back through the floo, to the international connection that he had in his office. Rufus Scrimgeour's

proposed meeting with Harry had not taken place yet, though Harry had read that Rufus had been in Boston the week before. He hoped there were no hard feelings from the man about his declining of the League invitation.

“What are you thinking Harry?”

“I’m thinking that if he talks to Rufus, it’s possible nothing could happen. He’s got a hard enough time governing right now without it being seen by the press that the Americans are doing his detective work for him. Plus, he might be a bit ticked at me for shunning the League. If it’s Travis? He’ll just be glad to have another potential headache gone. I don’t know about Bones, the only time I’ve really talked to her is that day in here, it’s hard to get a handle on her.”

“You’re becoming quite the political mind Harry, something tells me you weren’t before.”

“Well its Professors Lyman and Ziegler, they’ve had quite the influence on me.” Baylor came back through the floo a few moments later.

“Well I talked to Travis Biller, and he very quickly asked me to have him picked up. He is wanted for a few minor crimes over there, plus helping your Voldemort, a wanted man. It’s enough for me, and for Jacobson too. Harry, you don’t mind if I take this sketch with me?”

“Of course not sir, be my guest.” The older man shrunk it back to normal size, and pocketed it.

“I’ll let you two know when there are any developments. House elves catching a spy in our midst, I really have seen everything now, I might as well retire.” Dobby had a large smile on his face now.

“Are you going after him right now Mitchell?”

“I’m going to take a team down to Flackter Alley now, yes Joanne. I see no reason to wait, I’m curious as to how deep this Voldemort’s spy net goes. I don’t like it when foreign bad folk muck around on our

side of the pond.” From his initial position, he seemed to be warming up to the idea of catching Goyle by the moment.

“Anyway, I’m off.” Baylor went back through the floo to his office, where he had a group of his Aurors assembling. Mitchell was the head of the Milwaukee Auror Command, one of five regional Auror Commands around the country. He had 60 Aurors working for him, plus support staff. He dusted himself off, and quickly made copies of the Winky sketch. He handed them out to the five person team, called a Pod, that would be going with him.

“This is the man we’re looking for. His name is Gregory Goyle, age 39, and is a wanted man in Great Britain for numerous crimes. He is a Dark Wizard ally of that Voldemort character, and will have a tattoo of a snake on his arm. The kid he’s spying on, Harry Potter, is a friend of my son’s, so I’ll be going with you this one time. Brian, are you ready?” Brian McCann, a small 33 year old, was the team leader of Pod 5, and he nodded his assent. They weren’t that well trained at taking down other wizards, indeed there had been so much peace lately for Wizards in America, that most Aurors had never killed anyone in the line of duty. They took the floo into Flackter Alley, sketches in their pockets, and fanned out. Like Aurors in Britain, they did not wear uniforms, so Goyle never really had a chance at evading them.

Gregory Goyle Sr. had been loitering around Flackter Alley for the better part of two months now, and up until this week at least, had not gained much attention from it’s regular denizens. He had not gone so far as to get a job, and thus kept his wandering somewhat limited, time wise. He often wondered why Voldemort had even put him here, Potter was hundreds of kilometers away, and as far as Goyle could tell, had only come into the Alley that once. Harry was wrong when he guessed that no one was following him though. Through Voldemort and Snape, Goyle had unlimited amounts of Polyjuice Potion, and had enough different samples of people, that he had followed Harry everywhere he went while in muggle Milwaukee. People rarely talked about Harry, except after The Battle of the Ministry, and a few comments after the Quidditch game. He didn’t complain though, at least not to Voldemort directly. He had read all about the Battle of the

Ministry, and was actually a little relieved that he had been out of that fire. A few days earlier, while checking up on him, Pettigrew had told him there was no schedule for bringing him back yet, and to sit tight. The problem with sitting tight, was that he had nothing to do, and it was making him complacent, it was making him lazy.....it was making him mutter in his own accent.

McCann and his boys didn't take long to ferret out Goyle, he was near the Stationary store this time, and was distinctive enough that he stood out if you were looking for him. McCann and Baylor were the ones who saw him, McCann spoke surreptitiously into his mirror, drawing the others to the location. Baylor actually walked right past Goyle without giving him so much as a close look. He stationed himself right behind him, and subtly cast anti-Portkey and anti-Apparition wards around Goyle's area. McCann walked toward Baylor, but stopped right next to Goyle and started fumbling in his pockets, as if looking for something. He found it after about 30 seconds.....it was his wand, and he placed the tip right at Goyle's chest.

“ Raise your hands very slowly, don't make any sudden movements.” Goyle did not quite get the idea, and his right hand whipped up to a thick necklace he was wearing.

“Activate.” Nothing happened, but it was apparent that Goyle was not too gifted with accents, done under pressure, it was his normal one.

“Now why would you want to get away, if you've done nothing wrong? Mr. Goyle.” Goyle seemingly stayed still for a moment, but in reality he was trying futilely to Apparate.

“We put up wards against that kind of thing Goyle, and there are six wands on you right now, don't try anything. You're coming with us, no matter what Voldemort might want.” He used his non-wand hand and lifted Goyle's right sleeve.....and the Dark Mark was large and visible. He let the sleeve fall down, and relieved the Brit of his wand, which he tossed to one of his team members.

“Let’s go Goyle.” McCann took a portkey out of his pocket, and forced Goyle to grab it. They disappeared back to the office, while Baylor and the rest used the nearest floo.....portkeys not being cheap after all. Baylor went right to his office, where he floo called Murray, Jacobson, and Biller, in that order. After that was done, he headed right for interrogation room, where McCann, with his usual ruthless efficiency, had Goyle trussed up, and was about to administer Veritaserum. He got the nod from his boss, and three drops were placed in Goyle’s forcibly open mouth.

“What is your name?”

“Gregory Alan Goyle Sr.”

“How long have you been in The United States?”

“Since August 18th of this year.”

“Who sent you here?”

“Lord Voldemort.”

“Why did he send you over here?”

“He wanted me in place if we ever have to move on Potter.”

“Harry Potter?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever been closer to his school than Flackter Alley?”

“No I have not, I haven’t yet left Milwaukee.”

“Have you seen Potter at all?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Last week, he was here with a bunch of his friends.”

“Did you follow him around?”

“I did, he spent most of his time in muggle Milwaukee, shopping.”

“Did you consider trying to take him out?”

“I thought about it, but I’m under orders not to touch him. I probably should have though, he’s very dangerous.”

“Where are you living while here?”

“I’m staying at a Holiday Inn in muggle Milwaukee.” Among the contents of Goyle’s pockets was a room key, with the Holiday Inn logo on the tag.

“Have you committed any crimes while you were here Goyle?”

“No.” Well that was neither here nor there really, but it would have been nice. Baylor and McCann left the room.

“Brian, go to my office and floo this information to Jacobson in Boston, and then send a man to his hotel room and get his things. I think we’re done with him for the moment.”

“Are the Brits coming to get him?”

“They are, Biller is sending a team, they should be here in about an hour he says. Just keep the guy locked up in the interrogation room, with the rest of your team guarding him. No sense taking any chances.”

“Got it. So this Potter kid is friends with Drew?”

“He is, they had a duel on the first day of Basic Combat and it was pretty good. After that, Potter just started to include Drew in things with his friends. He seems like a nice kid.”

“Not the calm killer that we read about in the paper?”

“Well I’m sure he’s that too, not a bad trait to have I suppose. He’s certainly decisive, I’ll grant him that. Jacobson saw his memory of that battle and told me about it, I wouldn’t want to face him alone in a dark alley.” McCann went off to update Jacobson, and Mitchell went back to Goyle’s holding pen to wait for the Brits.....who arrived 30 minutes later, led by Kingsley and Tonks. They took custody of the prisoner, and used a series of portkeys to take him back to The Ministry, via Boston, Reykjavik, Dublin, and on to London. No public mention was made of his arrest, and he was quickly shuffled off to Azkaban to await either trial, or prisoner exchange. Goyle only checked in through muggle mail, and his next report was not due for another week, so Voldemort had no idea that his spy had been removed.

Thursday, October 31, 1996

8:30 am

Dining Hall, mail delivery time

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letter from Sunday, I’m sorry I couldn’t get back to you before this, but I have had so much homework to get done. The new Potions teacher, Professor Shepherd, is much nicer than Snape was, but he gives a lot more homework. I don’t remember Professor Lupin giving this much either. Fewer classes does not mean less work, so I’m glad I stuck with just six.

The Quidditch game was last weekend, and I’m sorry to say that we lost. It was against Ravenclaw this time, and we lost 330-300, and Cho got the Snitch over Ginny. I’m relieved to say that Ron played better than the Ravenclaw Keeper, Katie Bell and Natalie McDonald

had a field day on him. It was an exciting game, but I wish you had been in it. I'm glad that you won your game, your girlfriend is right, you are different when you're playing, in a good way of course.

By now you must know that Dumbledore got the information from your Voldemort battle from me, he invited me into his office to ask about the battle, and I did not really realize until afterward what had happened. Neville told me later that you surely would have assumed this would happen, so I hope you aren't angry with me. I remember you saying that your attorney got you some books on Occlumency, would it be a bother if I asked to borrow them? It sounds like a skill that will come in handy in the future. It makes me wonder why they don't just teach it here.

Ron and Neville have made peace, finally, though I would let it last a bit of time before you give Neville the Marauders Map again. From what Ginny says, they were a good team during the Ministry Battle, and that created a quick thaw in their relations. The problem is, it was replaced by Ron and Ginny now not getting along. I did not see it, but after you left the courtroom before lunch, Ginny slapped Ron hard across the face, and he told her if she ever did it again, she would regret it. She hasn't slapped him again, but that, in concert with her threatening him about Dean....well I think Ron has had enough. He talks to her only if he has to, though he's been much more friendly to Dean, if you can believe that. Overall though, he's much easier to be around than he was before the trial, and things are going fine between us.

Hogsmeade was canceled of course, but they are rebuilding the town now, and should have it all ready by Christmas. There is talk that we will be allowed to go to Diagon Alley for a visit in December, for Christmas shopping. I guess it all depends on the war. Speaking of the war, we're still boycotting the DA, but we decided not to make a big deal about it, to not attract so much attention. There are about 12 of us in the new club right now, all Gryffindors but Luna. Dumbledore hasn't mentioned anything about us not being there, either directly or through Professor Lupin.

I should go now, I have Prefect duty in a few minutes. I hope you are still doing well, and that we can make some kind of arrangement to

see you during the Christmas Break. Take care of yourself Harry, we miss you.

Love,

Hermione

The students in the Dining Hall were fascinated with Pig, who had delivered Hermione's letter. He seemed to love the attention as well, as the standard line was:

"Oh he's so cute." Harry could even tell that Pig was preening, though he did look a bit tired. He sent the tiny owl down to hang out with Hedwig to rest up.

He checked his watch, and had Dobby gather all of his Occlumency material and deliver it to her after her classes were done.

The rest of the day went easily enough, with only Defense to contend with, and again, no mass duel, as Ripley had them doing more spell dodging. There was no need for an exercise period after you go through 90 minutes of spell dodging, and some of the kids were not doing too well afterward.....though everyone was looking forward to the party that night.

The party was in the Dining Hall, and was set to last from 6-9 pm, with all the years welcome. Special, themed, food was to be served, and the only cost of entry was a costume. Students who chose not to dress up, and there were always a few each year, could get a soup and sandwich dinner in their Lounges. In Harry's room, Rick and Terry quickly got ready and left, as a pirate and a muggle soldier, respectively.....leaving Warrick and Harry. Warrick's costume was actually pretty complicated, as it was the full deal, utility belt and all. Harry just had to rub some orange paint on his face, draw some whiskers, and climb into his tiger suit, which immediately started Warrick howling.

"You're really going to go out in public looking like that?"

“I wasn’t aware that I have a choice Warrick...besides, it doesn’t look that bad.” Warrick was still grinning widely.

“If you say so. Why not put a big “Whipped” sign on your back while you’re at it?”

“It would clash with the costume mate.”

“So you agree that you’re whipped.”

“It’s damn hard work too.” Harry grabbed a bag of WWW goodies, and left with as much dignity as he could muster.....though in truth he didn’t mind the costume. It was silly, but that was the whole point of Halloween wasn’t it?

He met up with Sophie in the Lounge, and she grinned when she saw him.

“That looks really good, we’ll make a great pair.” She had the Calvin look down pat.....if one could get past Calvin having a girl’s face, and breasts. Harry gave her a hug, and while doing so slipped his WWW stash into her pockets, given that he didn’t have any of his own. This was a two person mission tonight, none of the others were in on it.

They waited for Reiko and Warrick, who again started laughing at Harry, while Reiko was just looking at her boyfriend with an exasperated expression.....though to be fair, this was a frequent occurrence. They were to meet the others in the Dining Hall, so they went downstairs.

They were among the first to arrive, and they immediately hit the food tables, loading up on deviled eggs, and other themed snack things. Jonas and Claudia showed up within a minute of each other, and the place was full by 6:15. Entertainment was provided by the RWA, Radio Wizard America, whose show was piped into the room. Dancing was set up in the middle of the room, and as little as Harry had ever danced.....well he already looked ridiculous, so why not go for it. He dragged Sophie out on to the dance floor and they spent

a good part of the evening there, and eventually Harry got the hang of it, Sophie already was a good dancer.

Every 20 minutes or so, Harry or Sophie would go get some punch, and a few minutes later the punch bowl contents would explode upward, showering everyone within range.....though coincidentally, Harry and Sophie never got wet. The twins had a new product, Liquid Cherry Bombs. They weren't made of liquid, but the explosion only affected liquid, so no punch bowls needed to be fixed. The cool thing about them is that there was a timer, anywhere from two seconds to ten minutes, all you had to do was place the tip of your wand on the cherry bomb and say the time out loud. This product was not on the market yet, it was still in the testing phase.....some of which testing was being done tonight.

They tried some familiar tricks as well, putting the Gravity Reversers in the candy bowl. The Cortez kids knew not to grab them, but there were 250 odd other kids who hadn't.....and it was a good thing that the girls wearing skirts were all wearing undergarments, because a lot of kids wound up on their hands for a few minutes. The faculty didn't mind all this mayhem, nobody was getting hurt, and a lot of people were laughing.

At Harry's request, the twins had whipped up a special batch of Talking Tattoos, only this time with dialogue that insulted the wearer. Harry and Sophie again took turns in 'accidentally sticking them on Joe Clancy, who had shown up dressed up in a professional Quodpot player, and a few others they considered to be unpleasant. The voices of the tattoos were quite loud, and this brought the teachers out into things.....until they realized it was a prank, then they just laughed and enjoyed the mayhem it was causing. Murray in particular had a feeling it was Harry and Warrick doing it, as she knew all about WWW and Harry's connection. She gave them points for creativity, and left it alone as long as no one got hurt. Offended she didn't mind, but hurt she would have.

The whole time, the other four were keeping their distance, and made sure they didn't touch anything they weren't sure of, allowing the pair to have their fun in their own way. Indeed Harry and Sophie were having a blast, they had agreed beforehand not to do anything like

this during the Christmas Dance, but this was now being rethought. Their final flourish at the end involved a nice little combination charm that they put on the speakers in each of the four corners, and acted as a aural strobe, alternating the sound between super loud and super quiet on a irregularly rotating basis. Murray allowed this for a few minutes, but eventually tired of covering her ears, and stopped the music rather than try to remove the charms, as it was already 8:45. The two pranksters were shaking with laughter, and considered it a job well done for the night. On their way out the door, Murray stopped them for a second, and quietly said.

“Should I be thanking you two for providing the entertainment?” They just smiled at her, the nice Headmistress who had introduced them to each other. Sophie put her arm around Harry’s waist and replied.

“It was our pleasure ma’am.” They dissolved into giggles, and went upstairs, it had been a good night.

End Chapter

Author's Note: I'm revealing, sort of, who Warrick's NBA uncle is in this chapter, and for the record I have no idea if he has a sister period, let alone one that fits the criteria. The player will not make any direct appearances in the story, or at least not have any dialogue.

Friday, November 1, 1996

8:30 am breakfast mail call

Dining Hall

Dear Harry,

I half considered making this letter a Howler, but I acknowledge your good intentions and will do the same. Ginny has recently told me of your offer to pay for her and the others to finish their schooling with you in The United States. Whatever interest she may show about this offer when she writes you, I am telling you here and now that she will not be going. Great Britain is her home, and I will not see her driven from it either by war, or any feelings she may still have for you, however unrequited. My daughter is still a minor for another nine months, and by then it will be too late for her to decide to abandon her home. I'm not saying that I blame you for doing so Harry, and I've told Albus as much to his face, but she will not be going and that is final.

I have not mentioned Ron thus far, because you and I both know that he will not choose to accept your offer. Hermione has kept me well informed of his difficulties with you, and I feel confident in saying that he will finish at Hogwarts, war permitting. I know you meant your offer for the best Harry dear, but please do not put such ideas in front of my children again, or a Howler will be forthcoming to you.

Hermione has told me that you will not be returning home until next summer, but if you change your mind, you will be welcome here on Christmas day, as will anyone you choose to bring as your guest. Be safe Harry, study hard, and be good.

Love,

Molly Weasley

Harry chuckled, as he slid the letter over to Sophie.....he couldn't imagine that Molly meant the letter to be totally private.

"That was amusing. Did Ginny ever say that she was interested in your offer? I don't remember you mentioning it."

"No, her last letter was just news about Ron, Dean, and the DA, it didn't even touch on the offer. You think I should risk a Howler and make the offer again?"

"No, let Ginny make up her own mind.....though it sounds like her mom has already decided for her."

"A Weasley family trait. The twins rebelled enough for all of them I guess, she won't take any of it from Ginny, even if she tried."

"What about that part in the note about Ginny's feelings? I thought she was over all of that?"

"Who knows what she tells her mother, she hasn't mentioned anything about it to me, and it's a dead issue as far as I'm concerned, me being taken and all. She has a boyfriend now remember, Dean's smart enough to tell if she's not focused on him." Sophie didn't look too sure about that, but figured that Harry knew them best. She had seen the offer firsthand, after Harry had shown them all the entire incident at The Ministry, both the parts before and after the show he had provided while in the med station. She had seen that indeed Ginny had looked interested, Ron insulted, Hermione thoughtful, and Luna and Neville politely not interested.

Harry had a thought, and put it away until later. He looked at the owl that had delivered the letter, it was Hermes, Percy's owl. He idly wondered if Errol was even still alive, though there was no way he would have made a transatlantic crossing in less than two weeks. Harry thought of Percy's sacrifice every day, if only for a brief few seconds, and him having somewhat disliked the other man made it a little worse. He knew what it was like to be an outcast with your own

family, and reckoned that Percy must have been after acceptance from his siblings, to do what he had done by spying on Fudge. This last month was the first time period that he felt he had really understood Percy, in the five years that he had known him. Percy had had a family only funeral three days after he died, and the twins had told Harry that the family had really come together.....even Ron and Ginny, for that one afternoon. His musing was interrupted by Murray, who had an announcement to make:

“Students, just to remind you that the Thanksgiving holiday is coming up, and classes on Wednesday the 27th will be held as scheduled, though your teacher may want to let you out early. Please let me or Professor Heyman know no later than two weeks from today what your plans will be. If you are staying here, then there is a signup sheet you must fill out. If you are going home, or to a friend’s home, let us know so that portkeys can be arranged for your trips there and back. The Wednesday port keys will be good anytime after 4:30 pm that day, the return ones are good anytime that you want to come back. Thank you.” She sat back down, and everyone returned their eating and chatting. Warrick turned to his roommate, he had gotten some mail too.

“I just got a letter from my folks, we’re all set for the holiday. You’ll come back with me to stay, they’re eager to meet you.”

“Cool, I’m looking forward to it.” Warrick and Sophie had done a pretty good job explaining the concept of Thanksgiving to him.....but mainly he just liked the idea of a table full of food. Though slim, Harry was always hungry.....and Warrick had done enough bragging on his mom’s cooking to make Harry interested.

“Reiko, my mom says that Thanksgiving Dinner is at 1 pm. So you three can come up with your family, and then we can go back with you for dinner there.” Claudia and Sophie had gone to Thanksgiving at Reiko’s parents’ home at Tecumseh for the last three and five years respectively.

“That works, the school usually has dinner there at 5 pm, lots of time for our parents to feel uncomfortable around each other.”

Everyone laughed, but the two of them were a little nervous about it. Reiko had long ago met Warrick's family, and vice versa, but the parents had not yet met each other.

"Just floo on in anytime after 10 am and everything will be going on. Mom usually starts cooking around then. Jonas, are you guys coming by too?"

"That's the plan right now, my mom is kind of mercurial with these kinds of things, us not having a big family and all. I'll be there if nothing else, I love your mom's cooking." Jonas' parents did not really like celebrating muggle holidays, except for Christmas, but they got along well with the Forresters, and had always been welcome at holiday dinners since Warrick and Jonas had become close friends three years before.

"How many of your family is showing up?"

"It's going to be small this year they say, only about 20 of us, besides you guys. Last year was 50 or so and it just didn't work." Indeed it didn't, cramming 50 magical people, including a dozen kids, into one large house was just begging for chaos.....and that was what ensued. Warrick's mother, even with magic, had needed two full days to clean up.

After lunch that afternoon, Harry returned to his dorm room and made his first Howler, something he had long avoided doing, for fear of getting to like them too much. Yes, he had never even sent Dumbledore or Snape any, he did not want them to get the impression that he thought about them very much. He had a book, in his now relocated Grimmauld Place collection, that explained how to make them, and learned that one could modulate the volume and tone of their voice, so for this one he made his as gentle as he could:

Hello Molly,

I got your letter today and wanted to make sure you got my reply as soon as possible. My offer to the gang to join me here was a spur of the moment thing, but I mean every word of it. I am getting a much

better education here at Great Lakes than I ever did at your alma mater, with it's shoddy teaching, Death Eater professors, and Machiavellian Headmaster.....and I wanted to share that with my friends, if they would like to take the opportunity. That's all Molly, nothing more. I love your family more than I can say, can you blame me for wanting to help them? Oh yes, just so you know, you can send me Howlers by the thousand, and I will never get to hear them. Another good thing about our school, they don't let us hear them, somehow thinking that young people need not be yelled at from afar. Otherwise you could add to the 65 I have received so far from my home country.

Take care Molly,

Harry

He sealed it up, and called for Dobby.

“Yes Harry?”

“I need you to bring this to Molly Weasley at The Burrow.” Dobby was used to surprises by now after four months with Harry, but this still rocked him a little.

“You are sending the Weasley mother a Howler? Really?”

“It's a nice one Dobby, don't worry. In fact, I would like you to stick around and see her reaction.....no, wait, I have a better idea, get the twins over there with you. I think they'll appreciated this even more than I would.” Dobby was on the verge of feeling Harry's forehead, to see if he was suffering from malaria induced delusions, but somehow held off.

“If she says anything harsh Dobby, tell her I don't like veiled threats.....but tell her nicely.” Dobby still looked dubious

“Okay Harry, if you say so.” This was no longer the little fellow who would beat on his head for even thinking to disagree, Harry had quickly laid down the law on that score. He took the envelope, and

copy of Molly's letter to show the twins, and disappeared into the trunk. He went through the floo and into the twins' research room.....or Frankenstein's Lab, as they had taken to calling it. Fred and George were there, working on some filling some orders for Hogwarts. They glanced up, and threw out a double:

"Hey Dobby."

"Hello twins. Harry has something he would like you to see." He handed over Molly's letter, and they read it with increasing laughter.

"Oh that's rich, Harry's life is danger every half hour, and she thinks a Howler is going to put him in line?" They dissolved into raucous laughter, but stopped when they saw Dobby frowning a little.

"What's the matter Dobby? Uh oh, how did he respond? What's his letter say?" Dobby merely held up the red envelope, and the twins went a bit pale.

"I do not know, it is in here. He says it is nice, but that he would like you two to come with me to hear it, and hear what your mother has to say back." Fred and George looked at each other, and in unison:

"A nice Howler?"

"That is what he said." Neither of them thought that Harry would really verbally roast their mother, but this was still a lot to take for granted.

"Umm.....okay, though we should probably ask if he looked mad when you left."

"No he did not, and he said that you two would probably appreciate her reaction more than he would." Well that was different, more and more they noticed that Harry shared their particular sense of humor, something they wished they had nourished more when they actually went to school with him and saw him on a daily basis. Still, their mother's sense of humor was much different from theirs, as they had found out hundreds of times over the last 18 years.

“I guess we should get this over with, we’d better not count on being asked to stay for dinner though.” The three of them went upstairs to the regular floo in the shop, and the twins tumbled through, followed closely by Dobby popping over. Their mother was in the kitchen, and just getting dinner started. Arthur had gotten home from work minutes earlier. Molly yelled hello to her sons, while she was stirring the pot.....she preferred the manual way most times, rather than have it stirred magically.

“Well hello you two, hello Dobby.” This, in fact, was Dobby’s first ever visit to The Burrow, but Arthur had taken to stopping in the shop a couple of times a week to talk with his sons, and he had met Dobby there.

“Hey Dad, how’re things?”

“Oh the same old thing mostly. Did have one interesting thing happen today. Rufus.....sorry, The Minister, I still can’t get used to calling him that.....well he wants to meet with me tomorrow at The Leaky Cauldron. He says it’s nothing bad though, he wants my views on a few things. Could be a promotion in it for me, all jobs at work have been frozen for the last month, while Bones and company sort out who is loyal and who isn’t.”

“Well there’s no doubt of your loyalty.”

“He mentioned that. Well we’ll see what happens. What brings you guys by? Need some home cooking?” Fred and George hesitated, as if hoping the other one would say it.

“Well, you see, what it is.....” George took over for his brother after he trailed off.

“It’s like this, this was not our idea, it was Harry’s.....but we kind of sort of agree with him on it, and he wanted us here to see it.” Arthur looked at his sons amusedly.

“Harry sent us something? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Well Dad.....okay, let’s try this again. Are you aware that Mum sent Harry a letter this week?”

“She mentioned something about it, I take it he got it? Hermes is pretty quick, Errol wouldn’t have gotten there until their muggle Thanksgiving.” Arthur, of course, had taken five years of Muggle Studies and knew all about their holidays, both in Britain and America.

“Yeah, today as a matter of fact. You wouldn’t by any chance know what she said in it would you?” This line of attack was making Arthur more curious with every sentence, usually the twins were either totally direct, or non-direct in a funny way. The fearful expressions that they had on their faces was something new to him.

“No I wouldn’t, now spit it out guys, what has got you looking like that? What’s Dobby doing here?” They looked at each other again, and mutually decided to get it over with and flee afterward. They handed Arthur his wife’s letter for comparison.

“Mum! Could you come out here please!” Molly walked in a few seconds later.

“What is it boys? Is something wrong? I haven’t heard you laugh since you got here.”

“Well you see.....” Arthur interrupted Fred.

“Out with it you hooligans! Enough beating about the bush.”

“Harry got your letter today, and he sent Dobby over with his reply.....and I guess he wanted us to bear witness. We don’t know what the reply says, so let’s not shoot the messengers okay?” Dobby was now nodding fearfully, the twins had infected him with it. Molly was now equally curious.

“Where is the reply?”

“Dobby, if you will.” Dobby was wearing a pair of kid’s athletic shorts, and pulled out the red envelope. The Weasley parents both gasped.

“He actually sent me a Howler?”

“Well you did threaten him with one Mum.....best open it and get it over with, and remember that we had nothing really to do with this. Sure he’s one of our best mates and our partner, and.....well remember we don’t tell him what to do.” Molly was getting a little mad now, and Arthur was reading the letter she had sent and was trying not to laugh.

She opened it, with the twins and Dobby all cringing slightly.....and the Howler played, just like Harry had intended.....maybe his voice was a little condescending in a place or two, exasperated in others.....but he wasn’t yelling, and the three messengers breathed easier with every word.

“Well.” Molly did not know whether to smile or frown. She quite considered Harry to be family, and this was the first Howler she had ever gotten from a family member.....but even she had to admit she’d asked for it in a way, and it was pretty funny. Fred and George had picked up Dobby and were balancing him on their shoulders, to the little guy’s delight.

“Dobby, you told us Harry wasn’t mad, and if we ever doubted you before, we never will again.”

“He wasn’t mad Dobby?”

“No ma’am, but they had pizza for lunch, and that always puts him a good mood.” Everyone started chuckling at hearing that.

“I didn’t know that they couldn’t get Howlers there.”

“He’s up to 65 now he says, the owls are directed to the Owlrey first, and any Howlers are taken away before the owls can go to the students.”

“Guys, you knew about this offer of Harry’s? To pay for the kids’ schooling if they wanted to come over there?”

“Sure Dad, we were standing right there when he said it. We didn’t really take it seriously though, even if he was sincere about it.”

“Well I agree with your mother on Ginny not going, and we all know Ron would never do it. What does Hermione say?” He remembered Hermione’s leaking patience with Ron, even though things were supposed to be better.

“Hanged if we know, we haven’t seen or heard from any of them since the trial fiasco.” Which was not technically true, since Harry always showed them Hermione’s letters, so they would understand what he was ranting about. Still, the Marauder’s Map letter was the only one they had gotten directly from her. Arthur appraised them.

“Why don’t you two do it? Go over there for a couple of months and finish school, have Lee run the shop, and the two of us, and maybe Bill, can help out when needed. I don’t blame you for not wanting to go back to Hogwarts after what happened this past summer, but this could be an option for you.” The twins started to scoff, but then.....

“You know, that’s not a half bad idea Fred.”

“Something to think about George, certainly. Anyway, we need to be off, we’re meeting Angelina and Alicia tonight for dinner, and we have some work to do at the shop later. Mum, any reply to Harry that Dobby can take back?”

“Just tell him that we all miss him, and that he should still try to get here for Christmas if he can.” Dobby nodded his head vigorously.

“I will ma’am. Goodbye.”

“Bye Dobby.” He popped back to the shop and went back through the trunk floo.....much easier that way, rather than pop 4,000 miles in one shot. Harry wasn’t there, he was at Advanced Charms, but he

was very amused before dinner when Dobby acted it all out for him and the gang. Harry immediately started plotting on who to send his next Howler to, he would have to think on that for a time.

Saturday, November 2, 1996

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

Noon GMT

Voldemort strode into the room, Pettigrew shuffling after him subserviently, as the room fell silent. All his senior Death Eaters were in the room, including all those rescued from The Ministry, though minus Goyle of course. Lucius and company had taken a couple of weeks to recover from their prison ordeal, not just from the physical side effects, but from the mental ones as well. Three months exposure to Dementors will do psychological damage even to a Dark Wizard. After that, it was a matter of planning and recruiting. They had lost over 35 Death Eaters to the Battle of the Ministry, and those numbers were harder to replenish than the similar losses for the good guys.

Snape was in the corner, now a full fledged member of the Council.....a Council of Advisors mind you, not one that had a scintilla of decision making ability unless their Lord allowed it. Indeed this was the first meeting of them since just after the Ministry battle. On Voldemort's instruction, Snape had sent a small note to Dumbledore, indicating that he was back inside the organization, and ready to do his duty. There had been no return note, but they had every belief that the old man had fallen for it again. Snape's true loyalty was always a question as far as the other Death Eaters were concerned, but Voldemort had peered deep into the man's mind, and found no intention to betray him. Snape still sneered at everyone, and treated his Death Eater colleagues much like he had his Order brethren.....knowing that none of them trusted him in slightest, except for his leader, be it Dumbledore or Voldemort.

"Everyone be seated, we have much to discuss." They all sat down, with Pettigrew still standing behind his master.

“I was just informed this morning that Goyle has been taken into custody. It would seem that American Aurors heard him speaking in his native accent, and picked the fool up on general principles. A few drops of Veritaserum later and our former colleague spilled everything he knows. The Ministry has him in a secure lockup at Azkaban.” He said this calmly, but with an edge to his voice that made the others a little fearful.

“Do you have any plans to rescue him my Lord?”

“Not at the moment Lucius, he is the only one of our people there, and Goyle himself is not worth the risk of an Azkaban assault.” Not exactly a ‘no one gets left behind’ ethos, but Goyle had created his own mess, there was no sympathy for him here.

“When was he taken my Lord?”

“Our sources aren’t sure, they only found out what they did through clandestine digging.” Voldemort kept most of his Ministry sources to himself and Pettigrew. Lucius and the others might have been worth rescuing, but their foul-ups had not gone unremembered.

“Will Goyle be replaced over there sire?”

“Not at this time, the mission was not generating any meaningful results, and we cannot spare sending an intelligent Death Eater over there, one who would, conceivably, not be caught using his true accent after over two months undercover.” This was said with a barely suppressed sense of rage, and everyone, who had been there at the time, forbore to remind him that the Goyle mission had been his idea in the first place.....until he did so as well.

“Still, I thought the idea had merit at the time, and Goyle’s reports did give us more familiarity with Flackter Alley and some of the differences between us and our American muggle loving brethren. Potter has shown no intention since of coming back over here, even for a visit, so he is still contained. Now, Wormtail, where do we stand on the Wizengamot and The Ministry?”

“Our new Minister is proceeding cautiously, as well he should. He had initiated a hiring freeze and no new personnel have been added. Plus, due to family objections, no autopsies were done, so Snape’s little potion was not detected.” Voldemort casually interrupted him.

“Good, we will have use for it again soon. A temporary Imperious Curse in a bottle, you outdid yourself Snape.”

“Thank you, my Master.”

“Continue Wormtail.”

“Thank you sire. So in reality, we only lost five of our Wizengamot members, instead of all ten.” Lucius looked at Voldemort as if asking permission to query, getting a nod, he asked.

“Has Scrimgeour announced plans to fill the 18 slots yet?”

“No he has not Malfoy, and there seems to be no hurry as far as he is concerned. He and Dumbledore appear to be getting along, but relations between them have always been strained. Right now he is meeting with Arthur Weasley, perhaps he’s offering a seat to him.”

“That muggle loving fool?”

“That muggle loving fool, Rastaban, is known to be loyal to their side, and after their debacle at the trial, Rufus needs loyal people. He’s not a stupid man, remember I know him better than any of you, having lived in his house for 12 years.....he’s just not ambitious, and while I know that does not fit any of us, please let us try to remember that there are other personality types out there. Plus, he’s known to have an influence with Potter, and perhaps our Minister is trying to open a back channel to the lad.” Pettigrew was growing more and more bold with his comments toward the repatriated Death Eaters, with Voldemort just smiling when he did so, which choked off any complaints. Pettigrew had not been sent on the DOM mission because his Master sensed that he did not believe in it, and since the rat was proven correct, he had more leeway than ever before.

“Have they found Fudge yet?”

“Not yet Bella, though it appears as if he might be in Australia or New Zealand, in that area of the world. Australia in particular is a very good place to hide, there are a lot of small Wizard villages in the Outback, and everyone assumes that there are some that have remained undetected. The Ministry is relying on foreign governments to search for him, as they are stretched somewhat thin at the present time. That is their latest information though.”

“What about the Auror recruiting?” Voldemort knew the answers to these questions already, but Pettigrew was taking more and more responsibility for the intelligence gathering, and was doing such a good job that the bad man wanted to remind his troops that doing a good job had benefits in their organization. So he wanted him to shine a little bit, and allowed the question and answer period.

“They haven’t done much yet, at least with new hires. They’ve telescoped the syllabus at the Auror Academy, but that does little for them right this minute. The earliest any of them could be ready is the spring. After that, they’ll begin large scale recruiting in every English speaking country.” The Auror Academy was located on the Isle of Man, and trained Aurors for not only Great Britain, but for Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada as well, but exceptions were made if the foreign students in question were to go to work for one of the governments using the Academy.

“The reactivation of The Dark Force Defense League has done a little bit to help, as a lot of retired Aurors are coming in to fill desk positions, freeing the others up to go into the field. A few European governments have offered Aurors to help on a temporary basis, and Rufus is considering it. Still, as of today, the Ministry as a whole is about 75 percent of what it was before our assault.”

“What about Travis Biller, the new Head Auror?”

“Nothing more than a calm professional. He resisted recruitment to our side when he was a student at Hogwarts, but was not hostile about it. He just said a flat no, and walked away. The Death Eater

who tried the recruitment, Mason Adams, has since been killed in action, but he told me what was going on at the time.” Voldemort stood up, and Pettigrew went silent and retreated to the corner.

“So you are all wondering what happens next I’m sure. Our next mission is to take place in December, and will again take place at The Ministry. We are going to let them get built back up some, they will get complacent, and we will go in and deal them another setback. The loss of yet more Ministry workers and Aurors will further erode confidence in the government, and make our task that much easier.” Bellatrix Lestrange leaned forward

“When is our next attack my Lord?”

“Our next full scale Ministry assault will be in six weeks. I am counting on the fact that our dear Minister will not accept the assistance of the other governments, his own pride will keep him weak. There must be something about that job that makes people prideful and stubborn. Full details about the operation will given to you when the time is right.” Snape smiled faintly at the generalization, but did have a question on another matter.

“My Lord, are we interested in finding Fudge?” Voldemort had not really decided that issue. On the one hand, the idea of torturing Fudge was incredibly pleasing. On the other, it was work that would not advance their cause at all, and the buffoon had in fact done what he was told, when he was told. Only the emancipation of Potter had caused any problems, Fudge had given no notice of this. Their agreement with Fudge did not involve the idiot’s safety if he fled though.....only if he stayed in place.

“Wormtail, has The Ministry put a bounty on him at all?”

“Half a million galleons sir, plus half the money that he stole if that too is recovered.” He scoffed.

“Hardly worth the effort then, but keep your ears open anyway. He might be good for a little sport after all.” The look on Lucius’ face in particular was bloodthirsty.

“Narcissa, what has your son found out about Granger and the Weasley brats?”

“From what he tells me, the five of them are pretty much out of the mainstream there, if they were every really in it. Longbottom has taken up with Lovegood it seems, but his confidence is at an all time high, he’s no longer the coward he once was. The Weasley siblings are constantly fighting and arguing with each other, with the mudblood playing peacemaker, though she is still dating the Weasley boy.” Voldemort closed his eyes, never a good sign.

“All this social gossip is fascinating Narcissa of course, but that is not what I was asking.” No Crucio yet, but that did not mean it wasn’t coming.

“I am sorry my Lord. Their Defense group is proceeding without them, as the old coot removed them from the leadership of it when he sanctioned it as a school club. They might practice on their own, but Draco doesn’t know either way. There is no student leader there now, Dumbledore is trying to prop up the Head Boy and Girl, a Gryffindor and a Ravenclaw respectively.”

“Good, that is how we want it. Just make sure your arrogant son causes the five of them no trouble. For all we know Potter might just sneak into the castle and kill him, and we do need his services for the time being. Now is there anything else?” Pettigrew nervously cleared his throat.

“Greyback sir? He has been demanding a meeting again.” Now the bad man smiled, which made everyone at the table, save Snape, nervous.

“Regrettably I am still busy and am unable to meet with him. Wormtail, tell the animal he will just have to have patience, it’s not like he has anywhere else to turn to.” Pettigrew knew this would not go over well with the werewolf, but there was nothing to be done now but send the message.....there was no way he was going to meet that thing in person.

“Now, everyone is dismissed except for Wormtail and Snape. I will let the rest of you know when I need you. Now go.” They filed out, thankful that there had been no cursing. Snape just lounged where he was, while Pettigrew took the opportunity to sit down.

“Snape, I want you to set a meeting with the old man, we need to accelerate our plans with him and the Order. Tell him some details about our arrangements with Greyback, and imply that you might be able to find out where their lair is. Do not lay it on too thick however, he must not suspect a trap.....too much.” Snape knew that even Dumbledore had his limits, but he understood what buttons to push with him.

“Yes my Master. When shall I meet him?”

“A week from tomorrow, at night, but do not notify him until the very last moment. We won’t have anyone there, so if the old man suspects a setup, he will be disappointed.”

“My Lord, what if he does not believe in my ‘escape’? He could very well insist that I return with him to Hogwarts.”

“Then do what he wants, and use your talents to get free of him. He won’t insist though, he will want the information he thinks you can provide for him. Give him just enough to keep him going, much like a muggle narcotics dealer and an addict. If he does not believe you, then get out of there as best you can and return to the rendezvous point, and we will get you back here. Your potion making talents alone are enough to earn your keep here, never fear.” Snape knew how useful he was, and was not afraid. He agreed with his Master though, Dumbledore would believe almost anything he told him, because he wanted to.

“Yes Master.”

“Wormtail, tell Greyback that he will be able to dine on The Order of the Phoenix in about six weeks.....the same night we are destroying the Ministry.”

“Won’t the animal suspect something like that? That he is being used as a decoy again?” Voldemort raised his eyebrows.

“What does he have to complain about? He got to kill nine people and destroy Hogsmeade, not to mention put fear into Hogwarts while destroying some perfectly nice greenhouses.....all without losing a man. If he was an equal I would treat him like one, but he is not. There is no use questioning the air when it is all there is to breathe, is it?” No there was not, though Greyback, again, would probably not see it that way. Still, orders were orders, and he was already mentally composing the message in his mind.

“Yes Master.”

“One last thing, start thinking of someone who would make a good Flackter Alley spy, and when you have a name, give it to me. This will be a short-term assignment, and will be meant to coincide with Potter’s next field trip. I want them prepared to bring a camera with him, I want to learn more about the lad’s new circle of friends. The gossip article about his new girlfriend was not enough.” The article, the Witch Weekly one that Harry had showed Sophie, had also listed the names of the other four friends, but no details about them.

“Yes Master, no action to be taken on Potter if he or she gets the chance?”

“No action, just pictures. Don’t bother having them trying to plant any charms on him either, it would be too easy to get caught. For all we know that is how they nailed Goyle, that moron.” With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the two men, and leaned back, contemplating.

2:00 pm GMT

The Leaky Cauldron

Arthur and Rufus were finishing their lunch and their discussion, which was more a free flowing idea exchange about the future of The Ministry, problems with The Order, and Arthur’s own ambitions about

his job. For two men that had never really had a conversation before last month, they were getting on quite well. Arthur could not help but compare the man to Fudge, and while there are very few that would not win that comparison, he was still impressed.

“Arthur, I am prepared to name you as the new Head of Muggle Affairs, if you are interested.” This had been what Arthur had been hoping for, as the current Head was quite anti-muggle for the job he held, and the Deputy was his daughter, and held the same views. They had been very close allies of Fudge though, which explained their remaining in the jobs.

“I am interested, but only if it is for the right reasons Rufus. I don’t want to be your inside man to The Order, or to Harry, if your interest lies there.”

“The Order of the Phoenix is not a problem for me Arthur, for as long as they stay within bounds and protocols. As long as Dumbledore knows his place, I will not move against him. As for Potter, well he is thousands of kilometers away and seems bound and determined to stay there, so for the time being he is not a factor.” Arthur almost goggled at the Dumbledore comment, but Bill’s self control had come from Arthur himself.

“What did you think when he declined to join The League?”

“I suppose I don’t blame him, though the war effort would be better with him as a more public face for us. I’m sure the old man is responsible, being the titular head of The League. Even after the publicity in August, I had not fully grasped Potter’s distrust of Dumbledore. The old man always sloughed it off, saying it was an exaggeration.”

“It was under-exaggerated Rufus, by everyone, including Harry for many years. It took a lot to break him from Dumbledore, but it is broken.....probably irretrievably. Albus is very charismatic, no doubt Harry is worried about him getting others to do the dirty work, while his hands remain clean.”

“The kid’s serious about staying over there for two years?” This was asking for insight, but many more people than Rufus had asked him this very question, so Arthur didn’t mind.

“So it would seem. My two youngest and their friend Hermione tried hard to bring him back, but he appears to be resolute. I gather from my twins that Harry is thriving over there, and learning much more than was taught him at Hogwarts.” Rufus just shook his head.

“What a waste, from what I’ve seen and heard the kid can outfight most of my Aurors. Travis is ready to offer him a job right now, bypassing the Auror Academy. Anyway, enough about Potter, as long as he is out of sight he should be out of mind. Back to business, do you accept the position?”

“Of course I do, I would be a fool if I did not. What about hiring my replacement?”

“Your call, in consultation if it comes from outside the current Ministry workers. If you want Perkins to replace you, then it is a done deal as soon as you tell him.” Since that was precisely who Arthur wanted to get the job, this was a relief.

“Perkins will do a fine job, and there are a few people I would have my eye on to be his assistant. I am somewhat hopeful that I can persuade my youngest son to take a job in the office when he graduates in a couple of years.”

“He won’t want to join those twins in their business?” Arthur grimaced, he would have thought so too before recent events. He knew that even if Ron could stomach being ordered around constantly by the twins, he could not see Ron putting himself under Harry’s power any more. Harry may not have exerted any authority in the shop, but the twins doted on him, and certainly seemed to have taken Harry’s side in his difficulties with Ron.

“No, I can’t see that happening. Maybe Ginny, but not Ron.” He knew he had probably gone too far, giving this relative stranger

insight into his admittedly complicated family life, so a change of subject was in order.

“So when do I take office?”

“Monday morning, bright and early. Your predecessor will have your new office cleared out and ready to go.” Arthur only had one more topic he wanted to explore.

“What about the Wizengamot? There are 18 spots to fill if I recall correctly.”

“Are you interested in one of them?”

“Absolutely, in fact if I have to choose between the promotion I just accepted, and a spot on the Wizengamot, it is a very easy choice to make.”

“I’ll keep that in mind Arthur, and I am confident in telling you that when the slots are filled, you will get one, without sacrificing your promotion in any way.” No donut ever made had a hole bigger than the one in that statement.

“You’re not going to do it anytime soon?”

“Not right away no, it would just be too difficult. I may add some names here and there, but do not expect a full 40 person Wizengamot to be seated for at least six months, if not more. Dumbledore needs watching Arthur, and the less power he has while doing so the better.”

“If he wanted power, he could have just taken the position as Minister couldn’t he?”

“He could have yes, but that would have opened him and his dealings up to much more scrutiny than he is accustomed to, even after Fudge set The Daily Prophet on him last year. That whole Snape thing has raised a lot of questions, as has the Potter situation,

though the majority of the public blames the kid for it rather than Albus. Add in his uneven record at Hogwarts recently.....” Even Arthur had to admit the Hogwarts issues, and a small part of him did not mind the idea of Ginny in Michigan for that reason, if Molly had not been mortally opposed to it.

“So you’re going to threaten him with those unfilled seats?”

“I already have, and while I would not exactly call it a threat, he got my meaning plainly.” Dumbledore really has fallen on hard times, thought Arthur. First he was played by Fudge and Umbridge, then Harry hoodwinked him on his way out of the country, and who knows what happened with Snape, whether his escape was done with Dumbledore’s knowledge or not.....and now, Rufus Scrimgeour was putting him in his place. How the mighty have tumbled.

“Don’t ask me to get in the middle of a turf war between you and Dumbledore.”

“I won’t Arthur, I have every intention of staying within the rules against him, and if he goes outside them? Then he’ll be finished, and there won’t need to be a war.” Going outside the rules was a Dumbledore specialty, but Arthur didn’t mention this, as the other man knew the Headmaster just as well as he did, if not better.

They soon wrapped up their lunch and went their separate ways, Rufus back to the office.....he was unmarried and had no children.....Arthur to The Burrow, where he told a beyond happy Molly about his new promotion. They flooded their adult children with the news, and a special dinner was planned for the next night. This was a two level jump on the ladder for him, with a 50 percent pay increase.....it would be a good Christmas in The Burrow this year. On the whole, he felt good about the lunch, though it was strange to be dealing with an intelligent Minister of Magic, let alone with one who had an interest in his views. There had been a lot of things about The Ministry that had bothered him over the years, and he was pleased to finally have an outlet for them.

He took over his new job Monday morning as promised, and immediately indulged himself with a message to the muggle Prime Minister, who he would be dealing with frequently. They made an appointment for the next week to discuss things, with Voldemort being tops on the list. He was not the only new Department head of course, he was one of seven changes made by the new Minister, and more were promised if things did not shape up. Among the letters of congratulations he received were notes from Dumbledore, and from Harry.....both of them were very pleased with the long overdue recognition their friend was now getting.

Tuesday, November 5, 1996

Special Projects Classroom G

2:00 pm

Ripley ushered them into a different looking classroom than they usually used. This one was set up like a muggle office building floor, filled with offices and cubicles. The students filed in, and sat on top of the desks as they quickly figured out what was going on. There was a slight buzz of excitement in the air, as they were about to put into practice what they had been learning.

“Welcome one and all to your second mass duel of the year, and your last one of 1996. There are some different rules this time. Now you will be part of a team, a team that I will choose for you. Five of you against the other five. The basic rules from last time still apply: No physical assaults, no spells that can deliberately cause a trip to the med station, and you still are allowed to use just two stunning spells. Teamwork of course is now allowed, and the winning team will all get a five percent bump on their next term paper, one that will be due in early February.....do not take any hints from this about when the next duel will be, you might have another in January, I haven't yet decided.....or maybe I have, and I'm not telling you. The object of the exercise is to give me the other teams' wands.....oh yes, two more rules: You cannot summon wands, you have to go get them when you incapacitate your opponents, nor can you use any captured wands against your opponents.....and the other one, in Harry's honor obviously, is that you cannot props, just your wands and your

wits.“ Harry smirked at his Professor, he didn’t have any swamps on him anyway. He tuned his ears to Ripley, as he used his eyes to look around the floor:

There were six enclosed offices on each side, with glass windows that allowed someone on the outside to see in unless the blinds were drawn, and wood doors. There were a series of randomly laid out cubicles spread throughout the main area of the floor, and all of the desks were laden with the usual assortment of office paraphernalia, including computer terminals and such. Harry was nodding along with Ripley to show that he was paying attention to him, but was already looking for sightlines and defilades.....of course he was not the only one doing so.

“Now, I will separate you into your teams, and you will be given five minutes to make your plans. Any questions?” Claudia raised her hand.

“Just to make sure, you aren’t getting involved this time are you?”

“No I’m not Claudia, though that will probably change at the next one.” Ray Elwood had a question as well.

“When you say props, are we not allowed to use the stuff in the office to fight with?”

“Yes and no Ray, you can use anything that will not seriously harm the other person. In other words, no blood. Don’t get any ideas about throwing desks on the other team. And the ‘outside’ doors lead to brick walls, so you have no choice but to stay on the floor.” He looked around and saw that there were no more queries.

“Now, when I say your name, go in the direction I tell you. I will make the teams relatively even, but do not read anything into who is on your team. Those on the left will be the Blue team, on the right will be the Red team.”

“Harry Potter, on the left.”

“Drew Baylor, on the right.”

“Reiko Aylesworth, on the left.”

“Claudia Cregg, on the right.”

“Ray Elwood, on the left.”

“Amanda Knight, on the right.”

“Sophie Weir, on the left.”

“Harold Abrahams on the right.” Harold was from Shawnee, though he and Claudia did not get along well.

“Eric Liddell, on the left.” Eric was the other Jefferson House person in the class, besides Drew.

“Liesel Matthews, on the right.” Liesel was one of Claudia’s roommates.

“You will have no official captains, but I put Harry and Drew on separate teams for a reason. Go plan, you have five minutes.”

Harry, Reiko, Sophie, Ray, and Eric all went into one of the offices, as Drew and his people stayed out in the main area. Harry threw a Silencing Charm at the door, and another at the wall, while Eric closed the blinds. They were now totally closed off. Reiko looked at Harry.

“So what’s the plan boss?” He stuck out his tongue at the boss part.

“First things first, take out Drew as soon as humanly possible. He’s probably saying the same thing about me, so there shouldn’t be much fire coming at you. Okay, who’s the best here at banishing?” That would be Reiko, from a lifetime of two Charms teachers being her parents.

“What do you want me to banish?”

“As much paper and paper like things that are on those desks, banish them right at the main body of the other team, don’t use anything metal except for paper clips. Sophie, Ray: once she does that, use Wind spells to make the stuff fly around. Eric, you and I will use the confusion to start picking them off if we can. Hang on a second.” He had a thought and left the room, with his hands over his ears in a gesture towards Drew’s team, letting them know he wasn’t trying to overhear them.

“Professor Ripley, could you tell us where we’re starting?” Ripley smiled, he was only going to share that information if asked for it, and Harry had been the first.

“Take your hands off your ears Harry. You and your group can start in the office where you are. The other side will start in that one over there.” He pointed to an identical office diagonally across the room.

“Thank you sir.”

He returned to the office and shared the information.

“Okay, that changes things a little, but not much. Let’s gather up the papers in here, as much as we can. Eric, you’ll help Reiko do the banishing, and I’ll keep them distracted. Only use Stupefy right away if you have a sure shot, and on someone who is by themselves. Remember, if we stick together, in pairs at the very least, then anyone who is stunned can immediately be revived, and they’ve lost a stunner.....they only get ten remember, as do we.” They spent the next minute gathering the papers up, and then Ripley called out:

“Thirty seconds!” Reiko and Eric stood by the door with their paper ammunition, with Ray and Sophie right behind them, ready to spread it. Harry stood next to the wall that adjoined the next office over, and threw a series of Muting Charms at the door, though not at his compatriots themselves, who did not know what he was planning to do here.

“BEGIN!”

Harry's wand was already aimed at the wall connecting his office with the next one.

ABRUMPERE!

The wall exploded inward and Harry ran through the hole, putting his wand to his throat:

Sonorus!

He then starting yelling unintelligible things at the top of his lungs, and saw the immediate effects as the Red group collectively grabbed their ears as a cascade of loose paper flew right into them, buffeted around by the wind spells of Sophie and Ray. The other four Blues were protected somewhat by Harry's Muting Charms, as they kept up the paper assault.

Drew screamed at his teammates to put Muting Charms on themselves, as he raised his wand and pointed it at Harry's new office:

And transfigured the windows into water, which did not hold too well as window material, and soon Harry's shoes were damp. Drew then put a Muting Charm on himself and let loose a barrage of tickling charms at Harry, hitting him with one, and forcing him to cease his aural assault in order to take it off. Harry removed the charm, and backed up behind the desk.....which was a good thing, since all five Red team folk started in on him, trying to knock him out in one fusillade as Claudia and Liesel advanced forward, perhaps hoping to rush him and take him out. Harry threw up a shield and yelled out:

"Time for Plan B guys!" There was no Plan B of course, they had barely had time to work out the first plan.....and for all of Harry's vaunted battle expertise, he still was not used to trying it the 'sanitized' way. It's not that he liked killing, or got his jollies from harming people.....but it was a lot more straightforward and clear cut than this was, and fewer rules to follow. The spells from the Reds were just bouncing off his shield, as Sophie and Ray ran through the hole in the wall that he had created and used the closer angle to lay

down some fire of their own, all the while Reiko and Eric were still banishing paper at the Reds, though it was now more an irritant than a deterrent. Ray looked over innocently:

“You mentioned a Plan B Harry?” Harry moved the desk slightly to give the other two some more room.

“ Very funny Ray, I’m open to suggestions.....wait a second.....Ripley’s going to hate me for this one. Reiko! Eric! Get in here!” The two in question came through the wall and looked at him quizzically as they threw up their own shields.

“Ray, you and I will shield the others while they use Reducto and knock out the lights out there, make the place as dark as you can, but only on our side at first, make their side of the floor stand out that much more. Do it now.” Ray and Harry stood in front of the other three and put up their strongest shields, one’s that took the most energy, but would stop almost anything. Ray was not chosen lightly for this task by Harry, they had done enough shield work in class for Harry to have seen that Ray trailed only Drew and himself in that ability. The other three stood behind the shield bubble and aimed above it, at the outside lights:

REDUCTO!

Times thirty, as the three of them proceeded to explode every light on the south side of the floor, as bits of glass and filament littered the ground. The side was now in relative darkness as Sophie and the others started picking off lights on the Red side as well, though none of them that were very close. Drew halted the stream of fire his side was generating when he saw the hexes and jinxes just bouncing off the combined shield of Harry and Ray. Not having a clear idea of what Harry was after, Drew told his people to hold off until it was made more clear.

By now 2/3 of the floor was dark, with some light emanating from some offices on the side, but not much. Harry motioned for Eric to sneak out of the original starting office and get behind one of the cubicles. Reiko and Sophie were using their Silent Magic skills to

rapid fire Reducto at the various side offices, shattering their windows and taking out their lights as well, which gave Eric cover enough to get back through the hole in the wall and find a spot to hide, about halfway between his teammates and the Reds.

By now the main floor looked like the office from Die Hard, and Harry was more than half tempted to summon the other team's collective shoes and make them advance barefoot. He did not give into temptation though, he wasn't sure what Ripley would say about the rules in that regard. He and Ray kept up their shielding as he motioned for Reiko to slip out and join Eric. To cover this movement, Sophie was still destroying the odd light out there, and Harry took aim at the next office wall:

ABRUMPERE!

At Harry's signal Ray ran through that wall, and now it was just Harry and Sophie in the second office on the left, with Ray in the third office of the six on that side. Eric and Reiko were now stationed at around the middle point of the cubicles, across from Ray. Drew and his team were still grouped together at the opposite end of the floor, all of them out in the open and under normal light.

Drew looked at his group, all bunched up together, and decided that he had played defense long enough. Using hand signals, he motioned them forward a few feet. He whispered as loud as he dared to.

"Stay together, mass your fire."

That was not quite quiet enough, and Ray heard it in the third office. He took some initiative and leaned out the open office door and used a fire hose spell to wet them all down. Eric and Reiko saw this and used the distraction to advance another cubicle, which now put them only 15 feet from the Reds. Harry and Sophie now crept out of the second office and drew some fire as the other side had just enough light to spot them. Nothing hit though, and Harry knocked out another light as he covered Sophie's retreat.

Drew saw that Harry had for some reason mostly divided his forces, and decided to take out Ray. First he did a drying charm on the floor, getting some decent traction for his next move. He motioned them to move ahead another five feet, and then leaned over to first to Claudia, then to Harold.

“Take Amanda and go get Ray out of that office, either get his wand, or make him retreat. If we can push them back, it’ll limit their options. We’ll cover in five, four, three, two, one.....go.”

Harold Abrahams and Amanda Knight sprinted toward the third office, but Ray had been ready for that, he physically kicked the office door shut, and throwing a locking charm on it as well, after which he exploded the next office wall and ran through the hole.....just in time to escape Amanda and Harold, who blew the previous door off its hinges and almost got him before he threw a solid shield in front of the hole, stopping their progress temporarily.

Meanwhile Harry was a ways away, and wanting to rip Ray’s head off for getting caught out like that. So much for the gradual approach, he waved at Sophie to go forward and join Reiko and Eric.

“I’m going to try to get Ray and I behind Drew. When you see us attacking, come at them full force.”

“Gotcha.” She moved off to join the others.

Harry himself ran back into office number two, and poked his wand through the hole and started firing Tripping Jinxes unexpectedly at Harold and Amanda, the third and fourth of which hit them, knocking them to the ground, to their great surprise.

Stupefy! Stupefy!

Both of Harry’s allotted stunners hit their targets, putting them out of the game. Harry ducked through the hole and collected their wands, pocketing them. He pounded on the wall to get Ray’s attention.

“Ray! I got them! Dissolve your shield mate!” The other boy did so, and Harry joined him in the fourth office.....though this news was loud enough to be heard by everyone outside. He left Amanda and Harold lying there, they were unconscious, so they would not bother anyone. Once inside, Ray was ready for him.

“I know I know, too rash.” Harry did not argue the point, but it was not all bad. In a quiet tone of voice:

“Hey, it worked, we now have the advantage. Let’s get behind the others and end this thing right now.” It would not be that easy though.

By now Drew and company were rushing forward and attacking the others, seeing no choice, having Harry potentially behind them.....though while they assumed that Harold and Amanda were out of action, they were not aware that Harry was stunner-less now.

Drew was in the middle, flanked by Claudia on his left, and Liesel on his right. Drew pointed his wand right at the cubicle hiding the three Blues, seeing only a large dim shape in the near darkness that they were engulfed in..

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

The cubicle raised into the air, and Drew threw it into the office on the other side of where Harry and Ray were stationed, the window shattering and glass showering inside and out. Claudia and Liesel were firing Petrificus Totalus spells even before Drew removed the obstacle, and thus walked their fire right into Eric and Reiko, freezing them on the ground before they were able to adjust to their cover being removed. They lay frozen on the floor, with Sophie hastily putting up a shield as it was battered by the freezing spells half a blink afterward. They kept up the attack, while Drew took a page out of Ray’s handbook and sprayed Harry’s door with a fire hose spell, temporarily delaying Harry and Ray from helping Sophie. Liesel kept hammering at Sophie’s shield while Claudia collected the wands from Eric and Reiko. It was now three on three, and Harry needed Plan C.

“Ray, get into the first office and flank them, Sophie is not going to last much longer with the three of them out there.” Ray quickly nodded and went back through the wall holes. Harry stepped toward Drew’s water spell and shouted:

INCENDIO!

Steam immediately filled that area of the floor as Harry only held the spell for a brief moment, not wanting to take the chance that Drew would end his water spell and get the full force of the fire spell.....not only because it might hurt Drew, but Harry also did not want to get disqualified, more sanitized fighting. He used the diversion and moved out into the main floor and started firing long range pulse spells at Drew to keep him occupied.....though it would not last long, as Drew used his wand to drag a cubicle into the line of fire, and then turned his attention to Sophie.

Ray had gotten around in front of the remaining Reds, and was individually dueling with Claudia as Drew now teamed with Liesel to batter down Sophie’s shield.....an advanced type that Harry had taught her, gleaned from one of his Grimmauld books. Still, with Drew throwing pulse spells at it at a rapid rate, it soon dissolved.....but Sophie was ready for it:

STUPEFY!

Which hit Liesel point blank in the chest, though Sophie’s happiness was short-lived because Drew took advantage by nailing her with the same.

STUPEFY!

Now it was dueling duos, with Harry against Drew, and Ray against Claudia.....though that would not last too long, as Harry put up his best shield and ran as fast as he could around Drew.....and dropped the shield as he dove to the ground, hitting Claudia full in the back with a Petrificus Totalus, while whipping back around and putting his shield back up.....which did deflect one of Drew’s allotted Stupefy spells. Ray ran up to Harry and put up a shield in

front of him to stop another Drew barrage. Harry kept his own shield up.

“I’m out of stunners to use, it has to be you.” Ray started firing tripping jinxes like crazy, and while they were dissolving easily on Drew’s shield, that meant that he could not go on offense, and Harry dissolved his own defense and started his own rapid fire pulse barrage as he moved to Drew’s side, inching closer to the other boy as he did so.....as did Ray, and soon they could see Drew’s shield weakening, and then it all ended in a flash:

Drew ended his shield and whipped his wand over to Harry, and in complete silence launched his last stunner at him.....and missed, as Harry jerked his body out of the way in a blur. That left Ray wide open to take his shot, and he did not miss.

STUPEFY!

And the match was now almost done. All that was left was the collection of the wands, and a minute or so later, Harry and Ray handed five captured wands to Ripley, who had materialized out of nowhere at the end of the battle.

“Nice trick Professor, Disillusionment Charm or Invisibility Cloak? Where were you?” Ripley gave him an enigmatic smile.

“These are all good questions Ray. Now let’s go wake up your classmates.” The battle had lasted fifteen minutes, and Harry was still full of adrenaline and was actually breathing rather heavily as his classmates joined the two survivors. Sophie went right up to Harry.

“How long was I out?” Harry thought for a tic.

“Oh, about a minute I guess, it didn’t last long after that. You did great though Sophie, you held them off long enough for Ray and I to get there and take care of them.” They were interrupted by Ripley.

“All right, everyone out and into the next classroom for the after action report.” They all walked out after him, and down the hallway to

Classroom B. They sat down at their usual spots, and waited for Ripley to begin his critique.

“Okay, first things first. Harry and Ray, you get a six percent bump on your February term paper for surviving the entire thing. Reiko, Sophie, and Eric, you each get five percent.....and Drew will get two percent for being the last one on his team to go down. Now I know it was pretty dark in there.....Harry.....but there was enough light that I think you will get a decent view of the memory in my pensieve. Let’s take a look.” He took out the bowl and did his thing with his wand and the memory. They watched the show twice, with no commentary either time, and Harry saw more than a couple of things that he would probably have done differently.

“All right then, now that you have a had a look see at the battle. Harry, give us something you found interesting about it.”

“Well sir, in overall terms, their strategy was pretty sound.....too sound really, since Ray’s rashness clearly fouled it up, even though it was not something I would have chosen for him to do.”

“Good point. Drew, what do you think?”

“He’s right I guess. If I had it do differently I would have just tried to seal up that office and move against the main body with all five of my people instead of three, and then mopped up Ray afterward if it came to that.”

“Ray, why did you do what you did?” All eyes turned to the Proctor House Junior.

“Just like Harry said, it was rash and unexpected. I saw them trying to stay en masse, and I wanted to disrupt that.”

“Interesting, very out of the box, but that’s the whole point. Now Harry, why did you guys blast out those lights? Did it work for you?” Harry shrugged.

“Well I wanted to give them a moment of pause more than anything. Plus I was both counting on Ray to stay put and for Drew and them to stay where they were as well. The darkness on our side would have been a great defilade if we would have had time to use it, but we didn’t. So in that sense it didn’t work, but on the other hand, it did us no harm either.”

“True, very true. Proof that just because something does not work as intended, it does not make it a bad idea on the whole. Now your homework will be the same as after the last mass duel. Just make it one typed page of what you would have done differently, if anything. If you don’t feel that you would have, Harry and Ray, spend your page justifying that viewpoint.” He looked at his watch, it was still only 3:15 pm.

“All right, get out of here and get some rest. Next time we will have a former Auror come in and give you a talk on some of his Lycan experiences, plus some demonstrations. Have a good night, see you in the Dining Hall.” They walked out, with the students all going to their various dorm rooms or Lounges to do some relaxing and/or wait for dinner. Harry stopped Drew for a moment and talked with him quietly, after which they shook hands. Harry, Sophie, and Reiko then walked to Cortez in relative silence, only broken once they got through the doors.

“What do you think Harry? That was a good victory.”

“Yeah, but it was kind of tainted don’t you think?” They look at him quizzically.

“What do you mean?”

“You really didn’t see it?” Seeing their confusion at what he was getting at, he explained it.

“It was tainted because we easily had the better team overall. The top four Defense students in the class are the three of us and Drew, and Ray is arguably fifth, yet we were all on the same team. Why do you think that is?” They had not thought of it like that.

“Well it can’t be because he doesn’t like Drew, Ripley’s always gotten along really well with him, Drew has been number one in our class in Defense since Novice Year. I think he and Drew’s dad served together at some point in the last Lycan war too.” Sophie nodded.

“You’re right Reiko, it can’t be that. Maybe he was testing Drew more than anything, to see what he could do with a weaker supporting cast. He still did really well, even with that. I guess that was what you were talking to Drew about Harry, what did he think?”

“He wasn’t sure either way, though he noticed the weakness of his team right away.....all that being relative of course, since the tenth best in our class in Defense is still damn good. Interesting though, the way things work sometimes.”

It was something they all chewed on for awhile until Warrick got back. He quickly raised their spirits with a long story about dueling in his Regular Defense class, and soon they were all laughing again. Before they went to dinner though, Harry went down into the trunk and called for Winky.

“Winky, I’ve got a little trip for you to take, something I only seem to remember when I’m in class, which is why I’ve waited this long to get you to do it.”

“What is it Harry? Where am I going?” Harry took out an ornate looking key from his desk drawer. It had a mate that he left in there. He also took out a Wizards camera and handed it to her.

“Do you remember me telling you that I inherited an island from Sirius?” She nodded.

“Well this is a portkey to get there. I want you to check the place out, see what the living arrangements are like, if there are any other people on the island, stuff like that. Take a full set of pictures, and stay as long as you need to get the job done, though if you were back before bed tonight that would be great. It’s possible that we will be

spending part of the Christmas holiday there, and I want to see if that's feasible."

"Okay Harry, you want me to go right now?"

"Yep, this is one of the portkeys I got from Gringotts that will get you there. I have another, and we can get it copied if necessary." Winky nodded and activated the portkey, taking her away.

She returned that night about an hour before bed, and found the gang in the Lounge playing cards with Dobby. She gave them her report right there.

"There is just one dwelling on the island, a three room muggle cabin, with no magic on it except for some muggle repelling charms. There is no floo fireplace, so you will to use a portkey to get there. The island is about three kilometers by two kilometers, and has a lot of coconut trees on it. I walked the island over and found no other people, and only a few animals and birds."

"Interesting, very interesting. Does that sound good for a trip there guys?" Winky cleared her throat before they could do much more than nod their heads.

"One thing though Harry, there is no indoor plumbing there or running water, so you must take the trunk with you when you go, so that these facilities are available." Good point, thought Harry. The gang all agreed that they would have to do an on-site visit during the Christmas holidays.

Sunday, November 10, 1996

MacTavish's Pub and Brewery, Aberdeen Scotland

11:00 pm GMT

Albus Dumbledore sat in a corner booth in the back sipping some hot cider, somewhat disguised in muggle clothes, though his long beard was still an eye catcher. He had received a floo message from Tom

at The Leaky Cauldron less than half an hour ago, telling him to come here and meet with 'a friend'.....which he could only assume either meant Snape or Harry, and he felt confident that it was not going to be Harry. He had brought only Tonks with him, she not being on duty this evening surprisingly, as all Aurors had been working a lot of overtime since the trial disaster. He had considered taking Remus along, on the off chance that it might be Harry.....but ultimately he had decided that the risk was not worth the reward if it wound up being Snape, who while he merely loathed Remus, as opposed to hating Sirius and James, it still would not be politic to have the two in the same room.

From his vantage point, he had a good view of the front door, but was surprised when Snape suddenly appeared right next to him, a pint of the black stuff in his right hand. The old man had placed anti-portkey and anti-Apparition wards around his immediate area, so Snape must have been hiding at another table, or in the restroom.

"Hello Albus." They both smiled warily at each other, but shaking hands was something neither had ever been especially comfortable with.

"Severus, how have you been?"

"Well enough I suppose." Indeed the younger man did not look bad, though as always he was pale and greasy haired, indicating that he was spending a lot of time in front of cauldrons.

"I had hoped that you were the 'friend' that Tom sent me up here to meet." Snape smirked faintly.

"Not the brat?" Dumbledore's brow furrowed a bit hearing that.

"Harry and I are not friends any longer, if we ever were." Snape, though not trying to be especially emotive, could not help but smile at hearing that.

"What has he done this time?"

“Nothing in particular Severus, nothing that Voldemort needs to worry about.”

“Are you worrying about it, that is the question. I know that you are convinced that you need the brat to finish off Voldemort.”

Dumbledore declined to answer this, and Snape saw the fat pitch coming right down the middle of the plate, and swung hard:

“One must wonder who Potter hates more, you or Voldemort?”
Dumbledore was no dummy.

“Is Voldemort wondering that himself perhaps?”

“I imagine it has crossed his mind a time or two. Potter is an excellent fighter, for all his other failings. He would be an asset to anyone’s side of a battle if kept under proper controls, even I can admit that in candor.” And he could.

“Has he made Harry an offer yet?”

“Not so far as I know. He is well pleased with Potter being across the ocean.”

“Even after the trial? After his wand being taken.” Snape smiled again.

“He does not really need a wand, as we both well know. I am quite sure he can perform the killing curse with just a wave of the hand. As for the trial? He considers that a success on the whole.” Dumbledore did not really disagree with this assessment if he were to be honest.

“How did he get you out? Were you aware of it ahead of time?”

“I was not aware, I had only intermittent contact with Pettigrew during the time of my house arrest, and the attempt caught me by just as much surprise as it did my minders.”

“Where is his headquarters?” Snape shook his head immediately.

“I cannot tell you that, for the simple reason that I do not know myself. Everything I have done has been by portkeys. I go to a public place and I am met by someone with a portkey, and I go back.”

“Does he know that we are meeting right now?”

“Yes, but he is not aware that I am telling you the truth, rather than the lies he has fabricated for you.”

“What have you been told to tell me?” Snape now pretended to grimace, but inwardly was a little wary of how smoothly this was all going. Dumbledore had not tried any mind tricks on him yet, and that was worrisome as well.

“I was told to tell you that there is another Ministry attack in offing, to take place sometime next month. It will not be a full scale takeover, just another killing spree, in order to heighten fear and weaken the Ministry.....and to take out some more Aurors, that is the attack’s primary goal.” Dumbledore raised his eyebrows.

“And this is not going to happen?”

“No it will not, there are no more large scaled Death Eater attacks planned for the rest of the year. Pettigrew and Malfoy are busy recruiting new Death Eaters, as there were significant losses during the trial assault.” This last sentence was totally accurate, as Snape had figured that he had to tell Dumbledore some true things, if only to keep the lies straighter in his own head.....and for the aftermath of the real Ministry attack to take place.

“Is Malfoy back to being second in command?”

“Not really, there is no hard and fast deputy there right now. There are Death Eaters with specific areas of responsibility that they run, but any second in command could be seen as a rival. Pettigrew is the Intelligence Chief, while Malfoy is back to handling the finances.

Bellatrix Lestrange heads the killing squads, while Nott leads most of the research.....and I, well I am the Potions Master there of course."

"So that is his brain trust? You five?"

"Not necessarily, he does solicit input from more than just us, but we are the main leaders." This was true in theory, as Voldemort was a little more cautious since the DOM and Goyle's capture.

Dumbledore leaned back and pondered for a moment as he sipped at his cider. He badly wanted to believe his friend, and this was the kind of information that he had been seeking, but there was something wrong in all this, something he could not quite put his mental finger on.

"What of Greyback, how does he fit into the whole situation?"

"He supplies extra troops, and we coordinate our actions with him to enhance the damage he does. He styles himself some kind of conqueror, but Voldemort will not even deign to meet him."

"Do you know where his lair is?" It took most of Snape's considerable self control not to sneer at these elementary questions that even Longbottom would know were fruitless. He took a second to compose himself inside before answering.

"None of us know that, Greyback is not quite that gullible. He knows that all things being equal, Voldemort would order us to take him out in a heartbeat. We use owls to communicate with them, mostly Pettigrew is the one who does it."

"Does Voldemort have any people inside Hogwarts?" The old man did not want to believe this was possible, but one could never be too sure. He himself had not suspected Quirrel after all.

"He might have one person, I'm not sure. That's the last thing he would tell me obviously, since I might be able to give you clues about it without meaning to. But given things that Pettigrew has mentioned in passing, it certainly seems possible."

“Who do you think it could be? The new man, Shepherd, perhaps?”

“Surely you subjected him to some sort of Veritaserum test didn’t you?” Snape spoke this as if any five year old should have thought of it.

“No, I could not do that Severus, he was reluctant to take the position in the first place, he never would have agreed to me interrogating him like that. Plus, there has never been any indication of Death Eater involvement by him or his family.” The wealthy Shepherds owned Witch Weekly, and were also one of the few British Wizard families with significant financial dealings in the muggle business world. They were all Slytherin, but not considered part of the nasty branch of them.

“Well then you should have done it on the sly then Albus, perhaps you are too trusting at times.” Snape was cackling on the inside, but this shot did not go unanswered by the old man.

“Some would say that about me in regards to you Severus, that I have trusted you for too long.”

“And they have been proven wrong, have they not? Do you regret the choice you made? Me over Potter?” This hit right between the eyes, but Dumbledore did not really agree.

“I did not have to choose there Severus, I have your services, and I will have Harry’s as well when the time comes. He will never choose Voldemort over his friends, so when the time comes, he will fight.....as he did at The Ministry, as you have no doubt been told. And you have wisely not forced me to choose either, so the status quo remains.”

“I personally don’t care whether Potter lives or dies, or if he is even involved at all.....that is the difference between the brat and I, because you and I both know he does care, a lot. That’s the reason you have not gone to that school to try and fetch him out, because he

holds you responsible for me, and what I am doing. And you worry that your old friend Murray would let him attack you.”

“Oh please Severus, you greatly overestimate things about Harry, as usual. If Harry attacked me he knows he would be persona non grata in Great Britain, and he does not want that. He has maintained close ties with his friends over here, in spite of being thousands of kilometers away.”

“He is a headstrong child, and I maintain that if you and he were in the same room in America, you would have to fight your way out of there, at best.....you know the at worst scenario.” Deep down Dumbledore totally agreed with this statement, but he did not dare admit this in front of Snape, or anyone else. Remus had anticipated this fear though, and assured him that Harry did not harbor violent intentions toward him, but he did not believe his younger colleague, at least not totally.

Snape took out his pocket watch and gave it a look. He did not want to linger here too long, and fully understood that he had pressed a few buttons a bit harder than he had intended. Dumbledore was smart enough that manipulating him was rather taxing, and Snape realized that his touch there was a little bit rusty.

“Enough about the brat, there is one piece of information that I feel I should pass on before I must go. The werewolves have agreed to do another attack for us.”

“Where and when?”

“Hogsmeade again, sometime in the middle of next month. Voldemort wants the town to be built back up again before they knock it down.”

“Not Hogwarts this time?”

“That was just a diversion, to get you and the others out of The Ministry. I mean they would have been happy to kill Hooch or any of her flying students, but that was just a bonus.”

“You will let me know the exact date and time?” Snape answered that question, and another, unasked one, that had been nagging at Dumbledore.

“Of course, as soon as I know them myself. Voldemort does not know that I am aware of this attack mind you, I placed a few Listening Charms in Pettigrew’s quarters, he likes to use a dictating quill when doing his correspondence. Voldemort would have a fit if he knew I had told you this, and my life would not be worth a Sickle.”

“Of course Severus, I will keep this to myself for the time being, until you can get me more specific information.”

“Do not tell Lupin especially, one never knows where his true loyalties lie there.” Dumbledore just ignored that last insult, if anyone could be trusted to stay loyal to the light side, it was Remus.

“As I said, I will keep it to myself, the only exception would be to tell Alastor.”

“I have no problem with that, if anyone can understand secrecy it is Moody. Now I must go, I cannot linger too long or Voldemort will wonder what else I have been telling you.”

“Thank you for meeting me Severus, I am very glad that you are still in the fold.” Snape smiled.

“As am I Albus, thank you for believing in me. I will contact you when I have any further information, probably through Tom again, he is a safe conduit.”

“He is at that. Be well Severus, and be safe.”

“You too Albus.” Snape walked away from the table, and had almost made it to the door, before being stopped by a elderly woman, bent and stooped, who grabbed his arm.

“Just because he believes you Snape, does not mean that we all do. Be very careful.” Snape just sneered at her.

“Your true face comes out Nymphadora.” He swatted her arm away and left.....fortunately for him, he spotted and removed the tracking charm she had laid on him before he got back to his rendezvous point to meet Bella. She scanned him thoroughly, and pronounced him clean before he was allowed to grab the portkey taking them home. Once they got back to Riddle Manor, he immediately reported to the study and a waiting Voldemort.

“Well Snape, did he buy what you were selling?”

“He certainly appeared to my Lord.....”

“But?”

“Let me have you watch it Master, and you tell me. Something about it all just does not fit.” Voldemort pulled a pensieve out of a cabinet, and watched the memory, amused to see his old rival grasping for Snape’s table scraps of information.

“You worry too much Snape, he believed you. Of course he is a little suspicious at first, who wouldn’t be? In the end though, he believed you.”

“Yes Master.”

“Good, you may return to your cauldrons now Snape. Good work.”

“Thank you my Lord.” Snape nonchalantly left the study, robes billowing as he did.

Meanwhile, back at the pub, Tonks reverted to her normal form and approached Dumbledore’s table. He was still sipping his cider, contemplating. She had heard the whole thing at the next table.

“Was he alone Tonks?”

“He did not make contact with anyone, that I know. Whether or not he had backup here, I couldn’t tell you beyond that.”

“Good enough, a very illuminating discussion.”

“So you believed him?” Dumbledore gave her a soft smile.

“I did not say that Tonks, I merely said that it was very illuminating.” With that, he got up and left the pub without another word, while Tonks just stood there looking confused.

Tuesday, November 12, 1996

Defense Classroom E

4:00 pm

Class was just letting out, and Harry stopped his classmate Ray Elwood for a moment.

“Hey Ray, can you do me a small favor?”

“Sure Harry, what’s up?”

“Could you post this in your Lounge? Somewhere where people will see it.” He handed his friend a small poster. The other boy looked it over and started giggling.

“This is for real?” Harry couldn’t resist a laugh himself.

“You bet, I’d really appreciate it if you would put that up for me.”

“No problem, I’ll do it when I get up there.” This was going to be good, Ray thought to himself.

“Thanks mate.” They went their separate ways, and when Ray got up to Proctor Lounge, he used a Sticking Charm to put Harry’s poster

on the bulletin board. A few students came over to look at it, and laughter ensued. It read as follows:

A notice to all WWW customers!

I thank all of you who have ordered products over these last months from WWW, and we look forward to filling even more orders from you in the future. Fred and George are introducing new products all the time, and you will be notified when a new one is ready for sale.

There is going to be one change in our delivery system though. So far I have used my staff, Dobby and Winky, to deliver your orders to you, and save you money on shipping costs that would ordinarily add ten percent to your bill. Dobby and Winky will still be doing this, but there is a small payment to be made for this, though not in money. For every WWW order you make, we will continue to waive shipping fees in exchange for you providing one Howler, in your voice, to the British person of my choice. I will have a script all laid out for you, and I will pick the person. This is a process that will take two or three minutes of your life, and should be some fun to boot.

If you are not comfortable with making a Howler, then the ten percent shipping fee will be applied to your orders. Any questions about this new policy, or to place a new order, just come see me. All orders already in the system will not be affected by this new policy, though you can still make a Howler donation if you like at any time.

Thank you for your attention,

Harry Potter

Harry had decided to take advantage of the 'students don't get Howlers' policy at school, and have some fun at Dumbledore's.....and some other peoples', expense. He, Sophie, and Reiko had spent the previous evening typing out scripts for Dumbledore, Draco, Filch, McGonagall, and a few other Hogwarts students that Harry had never really cared for, with Warrick sitting behind them, throwing out ideas.....Warrick couldn't type to save his life, even after five plus years of school term papers to do, hunt and peck was very slow working.....Reiko typed them for him after he

wrote them out for her first, with him repaying her with various favors over the course of the year.

People that he left off the list, for now, included his quintet of friends back there, Vernon and Petunia, and also Cho Chang.....though just because Harry decided that, did not make it so. Sophie and Reiko had enlisted their roommates, and Claudia and her roommates as well, to send Cho some not-so love notes, ragging on her for her crap treatment of Harry last year.....most of which he had shown the three of them in the pensieve, at Sophie's request. They had debated on whether to tell Harry or not, with the verdict being that he did not need to know at the present time. None of the Howlers, all individually done, were profane or threatening.....barely.

That first night, seven students/customers came by and recorded their messages.....all to McGonagall, as Harry wanted to send her a message about how little she had protected him over the years. Just seeing her at the trial, even if it was six weeks previous, had unlocked a lot of bitterness toward his former Head of House. He felt that she should have at least pretended to be a buffer against Snape for him and Neville especially, and her non-reaction during the Chamber of Secrets and his Heir of Slytherin crap had resonated as well. A lot of this he had pushed back in his mind over the years, with the knowledge that there was nothing to be done until graduation, until now. He sent the seven, plus one of his own, off with Dobby to be mailed from the Post Office in Hogsmeade.....he wanted to give the town some business as it was being rebuilt.

The first repercussion, though, occurred the next morning, as apparently Murray and Heyman had seen or heard about the posters. They stopped by his breakfast table for a chat, Murray fighting off a smile as she asked:

“Harry, just what the heck do you think you are doing with those Howlers?” Harry grinned sheepishly, as the two administrators did not look angry, just amusedly exasperated.

“I don't suppose having fun is a good enough answer for you?”

“Not really, no. Dare I ask why?”

“A little payback for the most part, but done in a fun way. Dobby!”
He popped in.

“Could you go get the Howler scripts for me please? I need to show them to the Professors here.”

“Right away Harry.” He popped out.

“I know I should have kept copies on me to show, but I just didn’t think of it.”

“House elves are handy to have around.” Dobby came back, and handed the pages to Murray, who passed half of them to Heyman as she read. Heyman had apparently gotten Dumbledore’s, which was the longest, and his eyes were looking quite similar to Dobby’s at certain points. Murray had abandoned all decorum and was shaking with silent laughter as she read McGonagall’s, and then Draco’s. She handed hers back to Dobby.

“All right, all right, they are quite funny, and not malicious in their words, if not intent. David?” Heyman handed his back to Dobby as well, though he passed the Dumbledore one to his boss.

“You really hate Dumbledore don’t you?” Harry shrugged, that was not as clear cut as most people assumed it was.

“Not really I guess. I’m always changing my mind on whether I hate him, or just loathe him and want him out of my life. I figure if I change my mind that much about him, I can’t really hate him.”

“Point taken. I agree with Professor Murray, as long as they stay funny and non-profane, I won’t prevent you from doing it, or waive the Howler policy here.....so that they cannot get revenge, if they so choose.”

“Thank you Professors. If I add new targets, or if the scripts change at all, I’ll make it a point to let you know.” They smiled at that courtesy, and after wishing them all a good day, walked away. The gang of six all grinned at each other, this was going to be fun.

Over the next week Harry and company got a total of 43 Howler donations, most from WWW customers, and a few from students who just plain wanted to Howler someone, even if it was someone they did not know, with the contents not being their own thoughts. This also had the benefit of selling more WWW goods, and while Harry had thought of it more as a prank, it was turning out to be a good business strategy as well. As they tallied up the numbers, Sophie just shook her head at her boyfriend:

“You know, you really do have a criminal mind.”

“Why thank you dear.” He pulled her into a loud kiss.....loud because they were in the Lounge at the time, business before pleasure.

“The twins don’t need an American store in one of the Alleys, they have you.”

“For two more years anyway. They’re very happy with how things are going, I have a sneaking suspicion that they’re sending some Howlers of their own too.”

“You’ve started a craze you know, what’s your next move?”

“A DIY Howler Kit? Make the envelopes purple or something, and they’ll explode into jam or something if they’re not opened.” Sophie opened her mouth to object, but then closed it thoughtfully. Harry immediately wrote the idea down for later delivery to the twins.

On the following Sunday, the 17th, Harry got his first feedback from Britain, courtesy of a letter from his old Transfiguration teacher.

Mr. Potter,

You will cease this harassment of me at once. All of your petty complaints and grudges make me that much more sympathetic to Professor Snape and his attitude toward you. I am warning you now, any further Howlers with American voices, and you will regret it.

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry was roaring with laughter after he read it, and the others did as well when they perused it. He had not sent McGonagall any others after the initial salvo, but that was about to change. He first had his own, normal, letter to send back to her.

Dearest Minerva,

You did nothing more than prove my point with your reaction to my campaign.....a campaign to open your eyes to a few of your shortcomings as a teacher and administrator. The fact that you cannot take criticism is one of them, and I will continue to delight in remonstrating with you about it. You also seem to have forgotten that I am beyond your reach, as it were. My Headmistress and Deputy Headmaster reviewed the script for the Howlers I had you sent, and they did not object. So while I do not have official school sanction for what I am doing, they are fully aware and taking a hands off position.

As for me regretting anything, don't kid yourself Minerva. I have the most powerful Wizard in the world plotting daily to kill me, you think your petty threats are any bother to me? I do thank you for the laugh though, I needed something to wake me up.

Mr. Potter

He sent this off with Dobby again to be mailed, he did not like sending Dobby and Winky into the castle if he could help it. In fact the only time he had done so was to get Hermione the mirror back in September. There was no reply unfortunately, and Harry knew now more than ever that his bridges to Hogwarts were burned.....and the

ashes scattered to the winds. He didn't mind though, his new favorite PG rated daydream was imagining his stick in the butt former Transfiguration teacher getting a Howler right in the middle of breakfast.

Dumbledore, Draco, and the others took their Howler barrage either in silence, or they tried to send Howlers back and Harry just did not get them.....that was likely Draco's strategy. He had made Dumbledore's Howler the harshest, but ironically sent him the fewest. He halted the campaign for the Thanksgiving Holiday, putting up another poster asking his fellow students, politely, not to send any Howlers while everyone was away. Harry soon got letters from all five of his friends back at the old stomping grounds, typical of them was Neville's:

Dear Harry,

Just so you know, you're almost causing a riot at every mail call. We all figured out it was you after that first morning when seven of the Howlers had Yank voices to them. I thought McGonagall was going to have a fit, and by the fifth one we were taking bets on who she would hex first.....it almost was Malfoy and his gang during Transfiguration that day, the ferret was making comments under his breath about her and you, and she overheard one of them and gave him a week's detention with Filch. Believe it or not Draco seemed kind of impressed with what you were doing, very Slytherin he said, getting others to do your dirty work for you.....until a couple of days later, when he got his batch of them, though he had to assume he was due. The rest of us are keeping our mouths shut about the whole thing, and McGonagall seemed to believe us when we said we had no idea you were planning it. Ron was very convincing in this regard, though he was laughing his bum off before and after.

Things are running normal here otherwise, there are 14 of us in the alternate DA, and we mainly just practice outside, or in one of the unused classrooms, always on Sundays. I'm assuming Hermione has filled you in on all that. I heard about the big deal Mrs. Weasley made about your offer to pay the Great Lakes fees for us, and I should probably tell you that while I really appreciate it, I won't be doing it. It's getting better for me here now, with no Snape, and Draco laying

off.....though I'm sure he only does it on his boss's orders, probably doesn't want you to come back here and nail him I suppose. I'm ready for Malfoy if he ever tries anything, but he hasn't yet. Nor have Luna's roommates, her stuff has gone untampered with, and they are a little nicer to her, though she spends most of her time with me or Ginny still.

I'm glad to hear you're doing well, your sense of humor is rivaling the twins, they have had quite an influence on you it seems. Take care mate, if you ever need anything, just let me know.

Your mate,

Neville

Harry had been a little taken aback at reading how Malfoy had approved of what he had done.....but shook it off after realizing that what they had pulled off was funny, and Draco probably had a normal sense of humor, way deep down. He was debating now on whether or not just end the campaign as it was, but nothing needed to be decided now of course. It could wait until after the holiday weekend.

That night, he and his Quidditch teammates had a raucous snowball fight out in the stadium, issuing a challenge to the Novice years in their House.....and the older kids pasted them, despite having two of their own on the Novice side. It was a fun time though, releasing a lot of pent-up energy. Even Reiko enjoyed it, as it was not that cold outside yet, but there was lots of snow. While the others were fighting it out, she quickly built a snowman and charmed it to chase after the little kids, to Harry and Warrick's delight, as they followed it and rained havoc down on the youngsters. They returned to the Lounge 90 minutes later, exhausted and exhilarated.

Wednesday, November 27, 1996

Special Projects Classroom A

10:30 am

Harry was straining with effort, trying to levitate his chair.....with him in it. It had taken him six weeks to get the cup hovering, and then Kinsella had them moving on to doing more and more weight, in addition to doing other charms and spells wandlessly. Harry was now floating about a foot off the ground, when Kinsella called time. Harry didn't hear him at first, he was concentrating so intently on what he was doing. He hit the ground with a thud when Ray tapped him on the shoulder, breaking his concentration and earning him some chuckles from his classmates.

"That was very good Harry, a foot in the air.....more than anyone else, but you needed total concentration to do it. Are you tired at all?"

"Not that much really, I just kind of zoned out there for a time, it really helped when I did that." That was interesting, Ray had never seen a student blank out like that when doing a simple Levitation spell.

"Something for you to think about Harry, it won't be of much use during a battle, but around the home it might." He turned to the class.

"All right, that's enough for the week, there is no homework for the weekend either. Have a good time with your families and friends the next few days, be good and be safe." The class exited, and Harry and company walked slowly upstairs. Rumor had it that Professor Maloney was barely even going to try to have class, understanding that the students would not be totally into the subject, them having visions of a four day vacation. Maloney in the past had generally let students out early, but officially it was a little frowned upon by the brass. In the grand scheme of things though, it wouldn't matter. None of the portkeys were going to be given out until 4:30 pm anyway.

The rumors wound up being true, sort of. No charms were actually performed during class, rather Maloney talked for an hour about NEWT preparation, the first time she had even mentioned the word NEWT in over a month. It was a free flowing discussion, and Drew contributed the most of the students, as his sisters, who were two and three years removed from Great Lakes respectively, had gone into great detail with him about their OWL and NEWT exams, one reason

why he was ranked number two in the class overall, by a hair.....right behind Reiko, who had her own sources of information, her parents.

The Professors Aylesworth, however, were a little thrifty with their insight on specific questions, wanting to see their only child do well without too much of a helping hand from them, and she had proven their method correct by being the top student overall.....Sophie was third, Harry now sixth, Claudia clocked in at eleventh, Warrick and Jonas right next to each other at sixteenth and seventeenth. Claudia had given Harry a lot of grief back in September when these ranks were posted and she was booted out of the top ten with his arrival.....and only the top 20 were posted, so no one had the ignominy of being last in the class, that they knew about.

After the clock struck 3 pm, Maloney ended the discussion thus:

“Okay folks, that’s all the business we have to deal with today. I’ve been asked by Professor Heyman to keep class going in here until at least 3:30, so you guys can just shoot the breeze until then.” They did, and no class stuff was talked about for the next half hour. The big subject was the holiday, and everyone’s plans for it. It turned out that only eleven students were sticking around school, all younger muggleborns who had been forced into the same kind of choice that Sophie had, and either did not have close friends to go home with, or just wanted to enjoy having their Lounges mostly to themselves. Harry had met his gang so early in his Great Lakes experience that he had not really found it necessary to speculate on where he would have gone for the holiday, it was just assumed by all of them that he would go with Warrick, Reiko, or Jonas. When he thought about it later, he supposed he would have just taken a four day holiday at WWW or something, or perhaps taking a room in Flackter Alley and doing some more exploring.

Once Maloney let them out, the gang went upstairs to pack.....which Harry and Sophie had already done, wanting some alone time in the trunk, not anticipating getting much privacy over the next four days or so.

“So you’re meeting your first American family, you nervous?”

“A little I guess, the only family I’m really used to being around is the Weasleys, this will be different I’m sure.” He barely counted the Dursleys as a family, more a collection of social misfits.

“It will be fun, Warrick’s parents have heard so many horror stories about Clancy, and even Rick and Terry, that you will be welcomed that much more.”

“Yeah, Warrick did not get much of a roommate bonanza did he?” Harry found his other two roommates just as dull as Warrick had, and in far shorter a time frame. They were nice guys though, he felt he should be grateful for that.

“No he didn’t. This is the second time in a row I’ve lucked out, first Ron, now Warrick. All that bad karma with the Dursleys paid off in other ways.” Goodness knows that his time with them should have some advantage, Harry thought.

Talk soon ended, and Harry and Sophie spent their private time being private. No they were not having sex yet, though the urges were getting harder and harder to control. Harry often reflected that he would never have been this adventurous at Hogwarts. There were always rumors of rampant sex of course, but the castle was somewhat wanting of places to do it.....at least privately anyway. None of the classrooms had locks on the doors, and the ghosts were always wandering around.....though some teenagers did not mind them as an audience. There had to be some ultra private places, since Ginny had dated Michael Corner right under Ron’s and his noses for so long.

They emerged, after some straightening up, into an empty room thank goodness. They had forgotten to check the Map a few times doing this, and had been caught a couple of times by a leering Warrick.....whose private place with Reiko was still unknown to the rest of the group, though Harry had quickly assumed it to be in the basement, since there was no shelter on the roof, and the two of them had not yet asked to borrow the trunk. Rick and Terry just

brought their girlfriends into the room, and used Silencing Charms and curtains at night. Harry just smiled at the girls come morning usually, and went about his business of getting ready for the day. They were two girls, Amy and Jill, that were in the other Cortez Junior Year room, the one not housing Sophie and Reiko.

It was now 4:35, and they grabbed their things and walked quickly to the Lounge. Harry just shrunk the trunk and put it in his pocket, while Sophie had two magical suitcases.....they could handle about four times the capacity of muggle suitcases whilst being the same general size. They were still pretty heavy, and Harry mentally grouched about her taking her room with her. He did not say this out loud though, he was pretty well trained by now. Jonas had already taken off for home by this time, but Warrick, Reiko, and Claudia were waiting impatiently for them in the Lounge. Claudia looked crossly at them.

“What the heck took you so long.....never mind, I’m sure I don’t want any details.” Reiko and Sophie traded details all the time, and Warrick just assumed certain things since Harry wouldn’t tell him much beyond ‘we have a lot of fun’. Reiko and Sophie kissed their boyfriends goodbye before grabbing onto the jump rope that was their portkey.

“Goodbye guys, we’ll see you tomorrow morning!” At Claudia’s command, the jump rope took them to Alice Springs, Oklahoma and the front door of The Tecumseh Magical Academy.

Warrick turned to Harry.

“You ready?”

“Yeah mate, let’s hit the road.” They both started chuckling, as neither of them had been in a car in months. Their portkey was a paperback book, and they picked it up.

“Activate!” With a jolt, they were away and as usual, it seemed like the whole world was spinning for Harry. He had gotten really used to floo travel over the last three months, but this was his first portkey since the car and his airport pickup. They were somewhat similar

experiences, but he always felt so out of control when he was traveling that way. After about ten seconds, the two of them landed in a heap.....with Warrick on top of his nearly 70 pounds lighter roommate.

“Ouch, would you get your elbow out of my ear please?”

“It’s not my fault you’re so damned small.....and your bony knee isn’t doing my ribs any good either you know.” They disentangled themselves and stood up, and Harry found himself next to the Forresters’ front door, on the inside thankfully. The Forresters lived in a muggle section of town, though their house was loaded down with charms and other magical enhancements. Warrick had told Harry that his mother used a car to get to work at City Hall usually, and his dad worked from home making his wands, though he did have to travel some to get the materials needed to make them.

The two parents had heard the friends bitching at each other and came in. They had big smiles and each embraced their son, while shaking Harry’s hand.

“Hello there, you must be Harry. I’m Nick Forrester, pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Karen, Warrick’s mother, nice to meet you Harry, Warrick’s written us all about you.” It was easy to see where Warrick had gotten his height from. Karen was about 5’8”, an inch taller than Harry himself still, and Nick was a good 6’5, three inches taller than his only child. Warrick’s basketball uncle, Karen’s baby brother, was 6’9”, so there was no telling how big Warrick might get.

“I’m pleased to meet you both, thank you for inviting me over for Thanksgiving.” Nick gave him a light pat on the back, which still almost knocked the wind out of him.

“You’re very welcome of course Harry. I’m guessing you guys shrunk your luggage or something?” They nodded in the affirmative. Warrick had a regular Wizard trunk, with three compartments and no living space or floo system.

“Go ahead and put your stuff upstairs, we’re waiting for both sets of our parents to get here, then we’ll go out and get something to eat.”

“Are we going to get to see Uncle Antonio this weekend? Are the Pacers playing here?”

“Sorry but no, they’re on the road playing Friday and Saturday, on the west coast. You’ll get a chance to see him next month, they have a homestand during your next holiday break.” Harry knew what basketball was, but he had never played it himself, and there were no hoops at Great Lakes. The televisions at Great Lakes did not pick up any actual channels, by design, and were there only to watch videos with. The library carried copies of muggle entertainment magazines so that students who lived at school year round, like Sophie, would have a reasonable idea of what movies they would like to watch.

“Come on Harry, let’s get our trunks upstairs.” Harry started after him, only to stop and clear his throat.

“Ahem, Warrick? What about Dobby and Winky?”

“Oh yeah, Mom, Dad, do you mind if Harry’s house elves stay over here too?” The Forresters did not have any house elves of their own, and they looked at each other and shrugged. Karen answered.

“I don’t see why not.”

“Dobby! Winky!” The two popped in, and were introduced. They beamed at Nick and Karen, and Dobby addressed them.

“Nice to meet you, parents of Warrick, he speaks of you often. He is a good young man, even if he does bet a little too recklessly on the flop.” Nick had taught his son how to play poker, and nearly cracked a rib laughing.

“I thought I taught you better than that son.”

“He cheats Dad, don’t listen to him.” Dobby looked affronted until he realized Warrick was kidding.

“Mother of Warrick, Winky and I have familiarized ourselves with your American holiday of Thanksgiving, and we will be pleased to help you tomorrow in any way we can.” Karen raised her eyebrows.

“Thank you both, I will find something for you to do in the morning, there is a lot of food to prepare.” The elves nodded eagerly.

They went upstairs to deposit their trunks in Warrick’s room, a large, rather empty, one that looked like it was lived in by a ten year old.....oh yeah. Harry now understood why Warrick’s closet at school was enlarged to it’s maximum capacity.....all his stuff was there. One of the parents had transfigured the king sized bed into a bunk bed setup. They set their trunks down on the floor, and the elves went back into Harry’s, as they were going to a muggle restaurant that night.

Soon after they went back downstairs, Nick’s parents arrived. Martin and June Forrester were in their early 60’s and also lived in Indianapolis. They greeted Harry warmly, and asked him all sorts of questions about Britain and what it was like over there. Martin owned a group of muggle restaurants, currently run by his two other sons, who would be joining everyone the next day. Karen’s parents arrived about ten minutes later. Thomas and Mary Elliot lived in Bloomington, about an hour’s drive south, where Mary was a Professor of American Literature at the big university there. Thomas worked as a Nike representative for the area, dealing with both muggle and wizard merchandise. Warrick had gotten his broom from his grandfather upon making the Quidditch team five years earlier. Both sides of the family were long time wizards, and Warrick had hinted on more than one occasion that he was under a lot of pressure to marry another pureblood to keep the bloodline clear.....they did not care a whit about what race she was, only that she be pureblood.

The eight of them went out to eat, Chinese food, as everyone made a big deal about Harry throughout the meal. Not because he was famous, although that was touched on, but because they had quite

resigned themselves to never meeting any of Warrick's roommates. They had heard so many horror stories about Clancy, and so little about Rick and Terry over the years that Harry was a novelty. Because of this, he didn't mind the attention at all, knowing that he was a bit of an in-person conversation piece. They asked little about the war over in Britain, and Harry certainly wasn't eager to volunteer anything about it if he did not have to. He found himself feeling very comfortable around them, and he was less nervous now about meeting everyone else the next day.

Harry and Warrick stayed up late watching television, something Harry had never gotten to do until the summer, with a few times in his hotel. They watched some Sportscenter, with Warrick explaining the ins and outs of American football.

"So why do they stop all the time? Doesn't that get boring to watch eventually?" Warrick sighed.

"Don't worry dude, we'll have time during the Christmas break for you to go to a game. Uncle Antonio can always get us tickets for the Colts.....that's the team here in Indianapolis. There are a couple of games on TV tomorrow, I'm sure we'll watch some of it here.

They also watched David Letterman, and Harry loved it, he had acquired a taste for comedy while watching movies, and was disappointed to find out that there were no Letterman video tapes out there for sale. They went to bed pretty late, and even then only when Karen came out and warned them that if they fell asleep at the dinner table the next, they would be wearing that food the rest of the day.

Thursday, November 28, 1996

Thanksgiving Day (U.S.)

10 am

Forrester Residence, Indianapolis.

Just as Harry and Warrick came downstairs, Jonas came tumbling out of the floo.

“Hi Mr. Forrester, what’s up guys?” Nick and Jonas shook hands, as no one else appeared to be coming out of the fireplace.

“Good to see you again Jonas, are your parents coming by?”

“I don’t think so sir, my mother is.....well she’s not feeling well this morning. Dad said he would stop by for dessert if that’s okay.” Warrick had dropped enough hints to Harry about Jonas’ mother to give the impression that she was a bit unstable. This happened every once in awhile to pureblood families who were obsessed with not ‘polluting’ the bloodline. Jonas’ mother’s family, the Harringtons, were especially noteworthy in this view. The problem was, there were very few other totally pureblood families left, and the blood was getting very familiar. Jonas’ father’s family, the Steeles, were of pureblood descent also, but they had emigrated from Australia right after Michael Steele was born 36 years earlier. Jonas himself was fine, and wanted nothing to do with marrying a pureblood simply because he had to.

“That’ll be fine Jonas, make yourself at home.” The three boys wandered into the kitchen, where the cooking was already beginning. The turkeys were already in the ovens, and Dobby and Winky were sitting on the counter, chopping vegetables and happily chatting away with Karen, her mother, mother-in-law, and two women who turned out to be Karen’s sisters, Grace and Lina. Harry was introduced to Grace and Lina, and the boys were quickly shooed away after grabbing some juice.

“Don’t worry about breakfast dude, you want a lot of room in your stomach before you visit my mom’s cooking.” Jonas was nodding at hearing that, his face had gotten greedy as soon as he had walked in the kitchen, perhaps hoping for an early sample.

More Forresters and Elliots streamed in during the rest of the morning, and soon there were about two dozen people there, though there were no other family expected as the noon hour approached. The

Tecumseh contingent came through the floo right at noon: Sophie, Claudia, Reiko, and her parents and paternal grandparents.....her maternal ones lived in Hawaii and did not like to travel. The teenage couples had a kiss-like reunion, and Warrick's parents came out to greet the newcomers. Reiko's parents, Lisa and Karl, warmly shook hands with their counterparts, as Reiko made the introductions.

"It's nice to meet you finally, Reiko and Warrick both have told us all about you."

Nick and Karen had both long taken to Reiko, who had been friends with Warrick since almost the first day of school back in September, 1991.

"Likewise, you have a lovely daughter, she's very good for Warrick I think." Warrick grimaced as his dad said that, but Harry and Jonas could not agree more.....and Jonas said so.

"I know what you mean Mr. Forrester, he was just impossible until Reiko agreed to go out with him."

"Oh shut up Jonas." Everyone laughed, and the ice was broken. The Aylesworths turned then to Harry.

"You must be Harry, nice to meet you." Harry shook hands with all four of them, and soon some shop talk started, as Harry proceeded to pick Lisa's and Karl's brains about some particular charms he had read about in one of his Grimmauld books. Jonas and Warrick soon abandoned them for the TV and football, while Sophie, Reiko, and Claudia went and played with the half dozen or so children that had come over. Harry was greatly impressed with their Charms knowledge, and agreed to send them a couple of Grimmauld books, volumes that they had long heard about, but had not been able to find copies of.

Dinner was served just before 1:00 pm, and it lasted three hours as course after course hit the table, only to be wiped out in what seemed like seconds. Jonas' dad Michael had floored in just before the prayer, and a place was found for him at the table as he spent a couple of

minutes shaking hands and catching up. Harry and Jonas, neither of whom got cooking this good at their homes.....when Harry had a home that is.....ate until they could literally not move for fear of an 'accident'. Sophie decided to have a little fun with her man upon seeing this.

"Harry, come on, let's go into the trunk and fool around." Harry groaned back a reply.

"Only if you want me hurling all over you dearest. If one more thing enters my mouth the results will be very gross.....and one more thing includes your tongue. I love you though Sophie, even if you're taunting me right now." She grinned and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"It's okay, the show was worth it anyway. I've never seen so small a person pack so much food away." Harry groaned again at the memory.

"Hey, I learned from the best, Ron. That guy can easily put way half his body weight in food." A slight exaggeration, but Harry's mind was stuffed as well and not firing on all cylinders at the moment.. Soon Karen came out of the living room with a large camera and set it up with a timer. Everyone gathered in as tight as they could around the table. Sophie and Harry had their arms around each other, Winky and Dobby in their laps, respectively, as the 32 people and two house elves all said on cue:

CHEESE!

End Chapter.

Author's Note: Warrick's mother's maiden name should be Davis, not Elliot. Just a bit of forgetfulness from me, sorry. I'm making up so many names in this story that it got away from me there for a minute. For the time being, I'm going to start referring to the new Marauders: Harry, Sophie, Warrick, Jonas, Claudia, and Reiko, as 'the gang', for no other reason than a shorthand way to call them something. So when I refer to 'the gang' that is who I'm talking about. Further additions to the gang may be forthcoming, but one never knows. One last thing, there is a battle in this chapter, one that I have been sending feelers out about for the last two chapters. It's a short one in terms of chapter space, not because it is unimportant, but because Harry is not involved, and I want to keep most of the story about him.

November 28, 1996 continued

Thanksgiving Day

Indianapolis, Indiana and Alice Springs, Oklahoma

Mid-afternoon

Harry and Jonas were able to move after about a half hour or so, and they gathered around the television for Harry's first American football game, even if only on TV. Michael Steele, Jonas' father, joined the three boys and watched the game with them, and Harry was more confused than after he had watched his first Quodpot practice. Michael was a investment broker in Chicago, and dealt mainly with Wizards who wanted to invest in muggle businesses. He made arrangements to have the kids come by the next afternoon for a tour, before he headed home at halftime to attend to his wife.....the official word was that she was 'feeling poorly'.

Soon thereafter, the kids and Reiko's family all flooded over to Tecumseh for the dinner there,. They joined most of the faculty and about a dozen students for another traditional American Thanksgiving dinner. Harry and Jonas got sick just looking at the food, but managed a small sample of everything, to be polite. Warrick and the women had paced themselves better, and did not rub it in too much to the stuffed ones. Harry was all eager to explore Tecumseh after dinner, until Reiko quashed it by informing him that there was very

little difference between the schools. Great Lakes and Tecumseh had been built within five years of each other, and the same architects had done both schools. The view outside was different, that was for sure. It had not snowed yet in this section of Oklahoma, and the six of them had a nice walk outside after dinner.

While Reiko's parents had been Tecumseh teachers all her life, she had never actually lived at the school, aside from holidays the last six years. Teachers at Wizard schools made more than enough to afford homes outside of school if they chose, and were not encouraged to live at school with small children. So Reiko had grown up in Tulsa, a stone's throw from Chrokar Alley, and had gone to muggle primary school through fifth grade, her mom and dad flooding to work every day. After that it was a debate on where to send her, as she was not allowed to attend her local school. Lisa had gone to Pathfinder in California, while Karl had attended Salem.....so they and Reiko decided on the road not traveled and enrolled her at Great Lakes. There were about three dozen such students floating around the system, including Murray's daughter, who was attending Salem as a fourth year. As soon as Reiko was enrolled at Great Lakes, Lisa and Karl had sold their house and moved into Tecumseh, saving for what they told the kids was an early retirement.

The boys flooded back north that night, and they all met at Michael Steele's office the next morning for the tour. Harry had picked up enough business stuff from the twins that he was able to ask some smart questions, and Michael in turn quizzed him about WWW and any expansion plans. Some of the terms flew over Harry's head, and he finally had to ask.

"Look Michael, if I can get Fred and George over here, would you give them an hour to talk about some of these things?" For an investment banker, Michael was not big on formality, and all the kids called him by his first name.

"Sure Harry, just owl me a few days ahead of time and I'll schedule a lunch for us."

“Thanks Michael, it will probably be during our Christmas break, but I really want them to hear some of your ideas.”

“Likewise, you three seem to have started something interesting over there. Zonko’s has always lacked a real challenger in that market, your WWW might be the thing that does it.”

The rest of the holiday was spent lounging around Warrick’s house, watching television and doing relatively little in particular. The other four looked the other way when Harry and Sophie disappeared into the trunk for a couple of hours, and after dinner Warrick and Reiko always seemed to want to ‘take a walk’. They were careful not to leave Jonas and Claudia alone, though things were warming up, slowly. Jonas was still not dating anyone regularly, and Claudia seemed totally put off by the whole process. Sophie and Harry were wondering if she was even going to go to the Christmas Dance, though they were afraid to bring up the subject to her.

They returned to school Sunday afternoon, and found that in fact the place had not burned down without them there. Harry zipped off a letter to Hermione about his holiday, and crossed his fingers while delivering it. He was no longer in possession of the original Marauder’s Map, having sent it to Neville prior to the break. He was already bracing for Ron’s reaction, though not badly enough to have changed his mind about what to do with the Map. There was no firestorm though, Hermione wrote a quick note back saying that Ron did not even know that Neville now had the Map, and that not a whole lot of anything else was going on at school.

Monday, December 2, 1996

Dining Hall

8:20 am

Professor Murray stood up and addressed the masses.

“Welcome back students and faculty. I trust we all had a relaxing, not to mention stomach filling, vacation these past days. Now that we

are back, it is only a short sprint until the Christmas Break, just 16 days. A reminder that the next Flackter Alley weekend will that of the 14th and 15th, with the two uppermost years going first on Saturday as usual, then the next two years on Sunday. The Christmas Dance will be held on the last day of classes on the Wednesday the 18th, starting at 7:00 pm here in the Dining Hall. Everyone is eligible to attend, and dress robes are strongly encouraged. Your portkeys home will be available the following morning during breakfast. Those of you staying at school should see either Professor Heyman or myself this week to sign up. Classes will resume on Monday morning, January 6th. Any questions, see any of the faculty. Have a good week.” She sat down, and the morning buzz started back in.

There was a debate that night on whether or not to turn on the Howler campaign for a couple of weeks. There had been no mail awaiting Harry upon his return from Indianapolis, so there seemed to be no repercussions, nor had Hermione mentioned any in her short note the day before. Ultimately he decided to continue the postponement until the new year. He planned on doing some kind of trip to Britain during the holiday, and wanted to hear first hand from somebody at Hogwarts how the Howlers had come off, though the recent letters from his friends there had all mentioned them. He also told the others that he was going to let Drew in on the trunk, though not the Map or the floo quite yet. He was tired of having to tip toe around that kind of thing when he was talking to Drew, and figured that he could be trusted. The others had no real objection, and Drew was initiated into the trunk the following afternoon after Defense with no difficulties. Harry’s one time statement to Warrick that there must be American trunk makers who did this kind of thing turned out to be inaccurate, as Drew’s cousin owned a Wizard Furniture business, and he had never heard of deluxe models like Harry’s, especially with that kind of price tag and extra features.

Reiko turned 17 the Wednesday after they returned, and her pleas about no party and no presents were blithely ignored by her friends, and they had a nice soiree for her in Harry’s trunk. She got quite a nice array of presents, including CD’s, clothes, and a lovely necklace from Warrick. Claudia and Sophie each turned of age in March, with Jonas and Warrick following in April and June respectively. Harry, though the first to be allowed to use his wand outside of school, was

the youngster of the bunch with his July birthday. He and Reiko were over by the kitchen, getting some food ready.

“You know, now that you’re legal, you can help me and the twins put up the wards on the cabin.”

“I can’t wait to see it. What kind of wards do you want on it? Aren’t the Muggle Repelling Charms enough?”

“I’m debating on whether to put it under Fidelius or not, and I want some stuff for convenience too.”

“Are you thinking about going there that often? Be like Professor Ryan and his Florida trips?” Harry laughed, he was fascinated by Ryan’s deep tan, and in December no less.

“I don’t know, I’m still chewing on it. Life is all about options you know.”

“That’s a lot of money in portkeys if you do decide that. You should just get another trunk and place it there, I’m sure the twins wouldn’t mind a vacation place.” Harry was stunned into silence, broken only by:

“Now why the hell didn’t I think of that?” Reiko cuffed him lightly on the back of his head.

“Hey, just because you do that to Warrick.....” He was smiling though, and she took his arm and led him back to Sophie, who was by the stereo talking with Claudia.

“You aren’t the only one around here with good ideas you know.”

“Yes dear.” He reached over and hugged her.

“Happy Birthday Reiko.....you get first dibs on your bunk when we get there.”

“Thanks Harry.....I think.” They shared a laugh, and told the others what they had talked about, and everyone agreed that it was a terrific idea, and Reiko was saluted once more. Harry had paid 2,500 galleons for the twin set of trunks he had purchased back in July, and he figured around 1,300 or so for just one. The thing is though, portkeys on the black market in Britain or America, usually ran around 30 or 40 galleons apiece, depending on quantity, distance, and who you dealt with. So in the long-term, the buying of another trunk made a lot of sense, given that the only people using the island were trunk holders and friends, which would ensure secrecy. Harry checked his watch, it was now too late to send Dobby to the twins, even if they were awake, they were likely to be ‘occupied’.

Harry had one portkey left for the island, which was unnamed, and had to either copy it, or buy the trunk.....so of course he decided to do both. Come Tuesday morning he sent Dobby and Winky both to WWW and asked the twins to get him 10 copies made of the island portkey, and at some point during the week, to go to buy another trunk from Anthony Hook in Knockturn Alley. The notes stressed that the twins were more than welcome to make themselves at home on the island whenever they wanted.....and to bring Alicia and Angelina along if they wanted, as long as the guys didn’t blab about Harry’s trunk. Remus and Tonks knew about the island, given that they had been at the will reading, and Harry assumed that Sirius had told Dumbledore. The thing was, he was sure that Dumbledore did not know where the island was, as Sirius had seemed to anticipate his ‘Dumbledore difficulties’ with his binding oaths to the two other beneficiaries. He really wanted to tell Hermione and the others about it too, but it was just too chancy to tell them pieces of the tale, as Hermione was easily smart enough to put the various puzzles together, and she was just too close in proximity to the old man.

The twins got the missives and acted on them immediately, buying the trunk during lunchtime, and getting the portkey copies done that afternoon, once Dobby got the money from Gringotts. The two of them did not have much that they specifically had to do during the day, just stuff that had to get done at some point. They did not mind doing these tasks for Harry really, he was contributing a lot of sales to the shop with his schoolmates, and essentially took no salary or profit sharing, other than a personal supply of pranks for himself and his

circle over there. They had loved the idea for the DIY Howler kit, and were putting the finishing touches on them in time for Christmas. Plus, the twins loved the idea of an island getaway, free from the war and The Ministry.

Sunday, December 8, 1996

MacTavish's Pub and Brewery

Aberdeen, Scotland

9:00 pm GMT

Snape was already waiting at the corner table when Dumbledore arrived, he was looking around nervously until he spotted his 'friend'.....and a guest. Remus was with him. Snape sneered at his former classmate, and addressed Dumbledore with a grumpy look.

"The metamorph not available for bodyguard duty?" Dumbledore ignored the rudeness, as he always did with Snape, to Remus' ever loving wonderment.

"Not as such, no Severus, she is on duty at present."

"It's always lovely to see you Snape, how have you been?" Remus was the soul of kindness, which he knew would tie Snape into knots.....and the expression on the greaseball's face was priceless.

"Oh shut up animal, don't give me an excuse." Remus still had his grin as he was about to respond, but the old man stopped him.

"Gentleman please, this bickering is pointless. Severus, you called this meeting, what do you have for us?" The three of them paused as the waitress brought pints of ale for Remus and Dumbledore.

"Greyback and his pack are set to hit Hogsmeade this Friday, in the late afternoon." Remus leaned forward, fingers interlaced.

"Why then? Why not at night?" Snape looked at Lupin with distaste.

“I do not choose the time and place of their attacks, animal. Though I am quite sure you knew the time and place yourself, being their kinsman.” Remus was still smiling, but now had slipped his wand out and was aiming at Snape under the table.

“It won’t work Snivellus. Much as I would love to kill you right here in the pub, you cannot goad me into it. I’ve made promises you see.” He used his free hand to gesture at Dumbledore, and now Snape had a good idea of where the other hand was, and what it was holding. He had no fear here though, he knew Dumbledore would not let Lupin harm him. He rolled his eyes dismissively.

“Whatever you say werewolf. That is the information as I have gleaned it, the rest is up to you Albus. We are paying Greyback a significant sum of galleons to do this, he will be there make sure his fee gets collected.”

“How much is he getting?”

“Malfoy told me somewhere around 100,000 galleons if the attack comes off as planned. Half has already been delivered to him.” That kind of coin was not going to put much of a dent in the Death Eaters’ coffers, but was a lot of money most other people, including Greyback.

“There is to be no diversionary attack by the Death Eaters?”

“None that I am aware of. Our next campaign will be against our squib population, though that will not start until next month. It will be a rite of passage, so to speak, for our new initiates.”

“How big a pack is he bringing with him?” Dumbledore was eyeing the younger man very carefully, focusing on hand and eye movement.

“I do not know exactly, he hit Hogsmeade and Hogwarts with 20, I assume there are reserves, but Greyback isn’t fool enough to divulge them to us.”

“You are not planning to wipe him out yourselves? I know Voldemort is not a fan of humans with ‘problems’.”

“They have their uses for the moment, there will be plenty of time to take care of them once Voldemort gets what he wants.....not that he will of course.” Snape’s mask had slipped a little, and Remus was hard pressed not to curse him Dumbledore laid a hand on his arm.

“We knew what you meant Severus. Do you have anything else for us?”

“Only that an offer to Potter is probably forthcoming, after the new year. Voldemort will offer him second in command in exchange for a public betrayal of you and Scrimgeour.” Snape was just making this part up, but it was so plausible that he could see both Remus and Dumbledore chewing on it, but neither was willing to comment on it in front of Snape.

“One more question Severus. Are your people looking for Fudge? Have you any leads on him?” Dumbledore had not heard the same Oceania rumors that Pettigrew had, only that Fudge was not in the Death Eater camp.

“He is currently hiding somewhere in the Australian Outback, ill gotten gains firmly in hand. It’s possible that we might mount a mission sometime in the new year to go get him, but I don’t know. Sometimes Voldemort cares about getting him, sometimes he does not. Now I must go, I’ve tarried here long enough. If something changes, I will send you an owl, or a message through Tom.” Without waiting for goodbyes, he smoothly got up and swept away. Remus stared hard at the other man.

“Please tell me that you are not buying his crap Albus.”

“I am not convinced, if that’s what you are asking Remus. There’s just something too neat and tidy about all of this.”

“Did you try to use Legilimency on him?”

“No, I couldn’t, I couldn’t let him think that I do not trust him. He would have sensed my intrusion in an instant, and adjusted accordingly.” Even Remus acknowledged this much, but he had something else on his mind for the moment.

“You know that Harry will never turn.” Dumbledore fixed him with a beady stare, then smiled.

“Yes I do know that Remus, do not worry. If Harry was going to go over, he would have done so by now I believe. Whatever Harry’s and my differences, we are both on the same side, and the other knows it.” Remus wanted very badly to believe this last statement, and while he trusted the old man miles more than he did Snape, he still was not totally there yet.

“So what do we do now? How seriously do we take Snape?” Dumbledore finished his pint, and got to his feet, signaling for Remus to do the same.

“We go back to Hogwarts, Order members are awaiting us there. Thank you for not cursing him by the way, I could tell that you wanted to.” He walked out the door and around the corner, and Apparated back to the school gates, a surprised Remus following.

15 minutes later, in Dumbledore’s office:

Dumbledore and Remus walked in on a mini Order meeting, with Moody, Kingsley, Bill, Arthur, and Molly present.....Tonks really was on duty this night. Moody opened things up.

“Well what did he want?” Dumbledore merely went to his pensieve and placed the memory in it, and showed it to them. At a previous meeting they had viewed the first Snape/Dumbledore discussion. Bill had the first reaction:

“Well who else thinks this is a setup?” There were heads nodding all around. Moody barely trusted the people in this room, let alone someone as wishy-washy as Snape, while Kingsley had had trouble taking Snape seriously since watching Harry put him into a wall back

in July. There was no need to wonder what the collective Weasleys thought. Molly was looking at Dumbledore.

“Albus? You were quiet after showing us the last meeting as well. What do you think?”

“I am sad to say that I believe you all are right, we are being played. Now the only question is whether or not it is Voldemort manipulating Severus to play us, or the both of them together. There seems to be no third choice that makes any sense under the circumstances.” This was as close as he had come, publicly, to saying that he did not trust Snape, in the over 16 years since Snape had ‘turned’ to the good side. Moody looked as happy as he was capable of looking, after hearing Dumbledore’s doubts.

“At what point do we alert Rufus?”

“I will go see him tomorrow morning, him and Amelia and Biller. I would prefer to keep this in-house within The Order, but The Minister has made it clear that any unilateral action by us will cost us dearly. I have not told him about the first meeting, wanting to get a specific time for the attack before I did anything like that.”

“What does that mean Albus? Cost us?”

“Molly, it means that Rufus made it very plain to me that he is not Cornelius Fudge, that he is not a bumbling fool that things need to be kept from.” Arthur had not shared with most of the others Rufus’ comments about Dumbledore and The Order knowing their places, but he was a bit shocked to see Dumbledore taking it so seriously. He leaned back and asked:

“What do you think Voldemort is really up to Albus?”

“I think the werewolves hitting Hogsmeade will happen in some manner, but it will be another diversion.” Moody got up and started hobbling/pacing around.

“Well there are four obvious targets: Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, Azkaban, and The Ministry. That’s not counting countless muggle targets they could hit. Azkaban is out, the only Death Eater they have there now is Goyle, and that fool is certainly not worth a major raid. Hogwarts is too easy to defend if it’s in lockdown. It’s either going to be Diagon Alley or The Ministry again.” Bill now weighed in.

“Well you forgot about Gringotts, but they are not stupid enough to try anything in there, yet. I personally think it will be The Ministry. If they can get one more victory like they did at the trial, there won’t be any Aurors left to stop them from any future targets.” Everyone looked at Kingsley, now third in command at the DMLE, behind Bones and Biller.

“Azkaban has been secured now, it would take a breach of The Minister’s office or Bones’ office to get to the prison, unless they actually fly over it, or get in a boat and find it that way.”

“What about The Ministry building itself?” Kingsley paused, and Molly’s question took on new portent. He replied cautiously.

“We lost at the trial because it was a surprise attack, though I agree that we should have expected something along those lines. If we are ready for them? Then it will depend on the size of their force and how many traitors are still left in the government. The Aurors we have now are good people, and experienced. A lot of the troops we lost in the rearguard fight were the new ones, though some experienced troops were killed in the courtroom.”

Dumbledore made a decision, changing his mind, and got up and went to the fireplace. He threw some powder in and shouted:

“Rufus Scrimgeour!” Using his actual name got him at home, whereas saying ‘Minister Scrimgeour’ would have gotten his office.

The man himself appeared within a few seconds.

“Albus, what can I do for you?”

“Could you come over to my office for a moment, I have something you need to see.”

“I’ll be over in a minute.” He vanished from the floo, and then came through the fireplace a few beats later. Dumbledore gave him very little preamble, and hit him with the pensieve memories of the first and second Snape meetings. He explained to the younger man why he had delayed in informing him of the first meeting, and Rufus seemed to understand. Moody repeated his theories, and Bill and Arthur kicked in a few thoughts as well. You could see Rufus’ mind calculating things as he listened, quite a change from his predecessor. It was quite an adjustment for most of them, having a Minister they could respect.

“Well, well. The plot thickens doesn’t it? I think you may regret not arresting Snape after that second meeting, but I understand why you didn’t. Interesting, very interesting. I agree that he’s trying to scam you Albus.” No kidding, thought everyone not named Albus.

“What do you want us to do Minister?” Rufus thought for a moment, and acknowledged that Dumbledore was asking, not assuming.

“Use your non-Auror members and cover Hogsmeade, I’ll leave it to you to plan how. Kingsley, you and Tonks may assist there as well. All your other Auror members will be detailed to the home office. I agree with Alastor that Hogwarts and Azkaban are not likely targets, and there is no value in hitting Diagon Alley, other than to piss off the rest of our population, and our friend should be smarter than that. Arthur, warn the kid in America, Voldemort might have some kind of plan to nail him there. His school goes on it’s Flackter Alley trip the day after the planned attacks.” A few eyebrows were raised at how closely Rufus kept tabs on Harry’s school events, but no comments were made out loud.

“Yes Minister, I’ll have my sons contact him tomorrow.”

“Good. For use against any werewolf or Death Eater for this day, those of your group who do not have it already, will have Avada Kedavra privileges.” All Aurors were authorized to use the Killing

Curse when they felt it necessary, though they would have to defend it in front of an inquiry afterwards, much like muggle police and a shooting board. Likewise, all former Aurors who left the service in good standing, such as Moody, were allowed to use it to defend themselves, as were members of the Wizengamot, and the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts.

“Albus, if you hear anything else, contact either myself or Travis, he will be running the show on Friday.” He left a few moments later, and the rest of the rump meeting was spent planning how to defend Hogsmeade, and how many, if any, of its residents should be told about the possible attack. Ultimately they agreed to warn them on the day, and quietly evacuate the town before any of the werewolves got there. That was the plan anyway, and they were wagering a lot of lives that Snape had not really meant to say ‘Thursday’.

Arthur paid a visit to the shop the next day, and sat down in the workshop with his sons and went over the situation.

“Now I know that you guys are in constant contact with Harry, so make sure to let him know what I told you.”

“We will Dad, We’re coming to Hogsmeade Friday, we’re going to help.” Fred and George both looked resolute enough, and seemed to be marshalling arguments to counter their dad saying no. He surprised them though, with his next words.

“I know you will, and I won’t try to stop you. You proved at the trial that you’re probably the best fighters in the family.....don’t tell Bill I said that by the way. Don’t use Avada Kedavra indiscriminately either, use your good judgment, and I know you guys have it. Interesting the ways you lot and Harry have rubbed off on each other. He’s made you better fighters, you’ve made him a lot funnier. All because Ron couldn’t find an empty train compartment 5 ½ years ago, and made friends with the quiet kid with the scar on his forehead..” He smiled, and sighed at the same time, a bit wistful. His sons were almost all grown up, and these two, who he and Molly had despaired about for years with their goofiness and lack of discipline, well he was proud of them. He yanked himself out of his reverie and stood up.

“Now get back to work, I’m sure you have loads to do, big tycoons that you are now. Come by for dinner on Thursday and we will hash everything out for the next day.”

“Sure Dad, we will be there.” Arthur hugged his sons, and after a quick hello to Lee upstairs, went back to work.

Friday, December 13, 1996

4:00 pm GMT

On the edge of the Forbidden Forest

Fenrir Greyback and Edward Grant surveyed the now totally rebuilt village of Hogsmeade. Even the Shrieking Shack had been fixed up, though few would ever go near unless they had to or were on a dare. They had their entire pack with them, now 40 strong after some new ‘recruiting’, as Grant euphemistically called it. The rest of the pack was situated about 10 meters back. They were using standard muggle binoculars, and all they saw were some Wizards and Witches wandering around the edge of the village, but that was to be expected, and had been planned for. They did not see Dumbledore, who was rather distinctive looking, or anyone else in the hierarchy that they knew.

“Do you think the Wizards are waiting for us in there?”

“I would not be surprised Edward, but it won’t do them any good. Voldemort will keep what’s left of the Aurors busy, they won’t have a chance to come over here and do any damage.”

“I don’t like the feel of this Fenrir, this has got setup written all over it.”

“I know, I know. But we have no choice, we need the cash that Malfoy is providing us. Besides, Dumbledore won’t be here, even if he was tipped off. He has to remain behind at the school just in case we try something there again. Make sure you and your group take out

the Shrieking Shack first though, that would be a good place for them to put an ambush.”

“And Lupin?” Greyback smiled at his friend, he always smiled when he thought of Lupin, the most powerful wizard he had ever turned.

“He will stay behind as well I’m sure, can’t let the little kiddies be exposed to any risk. Plus, I think the man is afraid of temptation if he were too near to us.” He checked his watch, it was now time to go. He turned the rest of his pack and motioned them forward to join him and Grant.

“Gentlemen, remember your assignments, we want this quick, clean, and casualty free, at least on our end anyway. Leave the Post Office alone like before, a little post slaughter confusion never did anyone any harm. Check your watches, we want this to take no longer than ten minutes at most. Now, let us talk a walk, shall we.”

Within a minute, the 40 grown men were spread out and ambling toward Hogsmeade. There was to be no film like charge this time, as they fully expected either company of some sort awaiting them, or at least some kind of early warning system. They easily got inside the village with no trouble, and spread out even more, so that no more or less than two or three werewolves were in front of each building, though they were all standing casually talking, trying not to attract any undue attention.

Greyback was standing in front of Dervish and Banges, waiting for the signal to begin. About three, very long, minutes after they got into position, he got it:

A single Filibuster firework shot into the air from the edge of the village. Greyback answered with a howl of his own, and his troops all transformed into their alter egos, before then bursting into whatever building they were standing next to, all ready to tear the place apart. There was only one problem:

A welcoming committee awaited them in each building.

Simultaneously, at The Ministry of Magic:

Magdalena Edgecombe's office, Floo Regulatory Panel

Magdalena Edgecombe, who was in charge of the British floo system for The Ministry, started manipulating controls on a grid next to her desk. The grid was the hub of the floo system, and with a flick of her wand, she could disable as few as one fireplace, and as many as all of them. This time though, she was concentrating on one small village in central Scotland.

Flashback five minutes to the inside of The Three Broomsticks.

There were at least two Order members in every building but the Shrieking Shack, which was empty. Remus and Tonks were in this building, and awaited the arrival of Dumbledore, who was getting ready to put the castle into lockdown so that he and Flitwick could head to Hogsmeade, McGonagall needing to remain behind to take the castle back out of lockdown. Only Remus and Hagrid, who was in Dervish and Banges, were here in the village from the Hogwarts faculty. The rest of the villagers had been evacuated to Diagon Alley.

"Are they out there Remus? Can you sense them?"

"It doesn't work that way Tonks, I can't sense them any more than I can sense a regular human. But yes, I think they're out there."

"What if this is nothing more than a feint? How do we even know they're attacking here? Or here today?"

"For the love of God Tonks calm the bloody hell down. I detest Snape more than you ever could, but I believed him when he said there would be an attack today, and here to boot. He has too much to risk to lie to us." Tonks looked incredulous.

"Say what?"

"Tonks, Voldemort is saving Snape for when he lures Harry over here to try and finish him off. He's not going to waste him on

something like this. Even if Voldemort destroys both the Order and the Aurors, he still hasn't won until he takes out Harry. Our numbers can always be replaced."

"And the small factor of Harry not believing in the Prophecy?" Remus just waved that off.

"Details Tonks, details. Nobody wants Voldemort dead more than Harry does, even if he won't admit it to anyone but himself. He can talk about not caring all he wants, but Voldemort is still the man who murdered his mother and father in front of him." Tonks looked at Remus with a new perspective.

"You sound like Dumbledore when you say things like that." The older man grimaced.

"I really hope not, because after Harry kills Voldemort, our beloved Headmaster will likely be next." Tonks didn't get a chance to respond to that, because Dumbledore came through the floo just then.

"The castle is in lockdown, nothing can go in or out."

"What about those mirrors? Draco could be using one of those to communicate with one or more of his parents."

"I have a jamming spell operating throughout the castle, rendering them ineffective. Draco Malfoy is currently serving a detention with Professor Sprout, and his wand has been taken away, just in case. There will be no warnings from Hogwarts to our enemies, wherever they might be." Remus and Tonks took this in, both were impressed with the thoroughness. Silence filled the room, and a few moments later they heard the faint sound of a firework go off, then a few seconds later, a werewolf howl. This was followed by the obvious, and painful for Remus, sounds of the change. The Wizards already had their wands out and aimed, and braced themselves.

"Good luck Remus, good luck Tonks."

The door was broken open just then, and three werewolves broke in, immediately looking for people to kill.

AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!

The werewolves were very, very fast, and were almost upon their enemies when the spells hit them, and they all hit their targets. They could withstand a lot of magical punishment, and could shrug off most curses, one reason they had not been decimated by the Wizards in America.....but a direct hit by Avada Kedavra, no matter where, was immediately fatal to anyone caught by it.

The werewolves, none of them Greyback or Grant, fell hard, and the floor shook a little bit. The werewolves were now slowly transforming back to human form, as death made the change take a little longer. The Wizards did not recognize any of them.

“Let’s go now, the others will be needing us.” Dumbledore had just gotten that out when they heard multiple explosions in the near distance.

“Those are magical explosions, it would appear as if we have more company.” He blinked for a moment, trying to Apparate out, but he couldn’t. He took a portkey out of his robes, destination The Ministry, and it would not activate either. He strode over to the fireplace he had used minutes earlier and threw some floo powder in it, useless.

“The Death Eaters are here, they have anti-Apparition and anti-portkey wards up, and have somehow shut the floo off. We will have to fight our way out. Let’s go.” The three of them left the pub, and saw that Zonkos and Gladrags were both in flames, and Death Eaters were starting to enter the village. Dark Marks covered the sky now, and green light was now being sent toward them, as the three of them seemed to be the only Light Wizards out and about at the moment. They ducked back behind the building.

“Remus, I am afraid I must ask you to transform for the moment. You will run much faster as a werewolf, and that seems to be the only

way out of here at the moment. Go outside the zone and get to The Ministry.” Remus did not argue, he knew it was the best way.

“I’ll be back with help before you know it.” He pocketed his wand, and made the painful transformation into his ‘other side’. Tonks had never seen this before, and was horrified at what her close friend was becoming.

Remus did not waste a second after the change was complete, and immediately sped away, running at three times the pace that a normal human could. He got about 400 meters outside the village, and gambled that the ‘no-fly’ zone did not extend any further. He willed himself to change back to human form, and though he struggled, managed to do so. He had a special portkey on his person, much like Dumbledore did, that took him right to Travis Biller’s office. Biller was in there talking to his former crew, now led by Sarah Westbrook. Everything had been quiet at The Ministry up until now.

“Remus? What’s happening there?”

“Death Eaters have sealed off Hogsmeade, no floo, portkey, Apparition, nothing. I think we got the drop on the other werewolves, but Voldemort’s forces are attacking now.” Travis was up now, and led Remus and the other Aurors out.

“How many Death Eaters?”

“I didn’t get a good look Travis, maybe a few dozen. Dumbledore sent me off right away to get word to you.”

“How close can we get to Hogsmeade via Apparition?”

“About 400 meters or so.”

Biller turned to a portal on the wall and stuck his wand in it. Instantly a very loud alarm sounded, and Travis put *Magis Sonorus* on his voice:

“Attention all Aurors, Hogsmeade is now under attack! Werewolves and Death Eaters have both been sighted there en masse! All floo,

portkey, and Apparition to Hogsmeade has been jammed! I want Crews A through T to immediately portkey to any point 400 meters outside of the village, and then proceed to Hogsmeade and assist the Order of Phoenix people! Move!" Crews A-T represented over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Auror Command, all of whom were on duty of some sort at this moment, each crew having three members. This would leave only 15 Aurors to defend the home office, but what else was there to do. By the end of this spiel Rufus and Bones both had come a running over to them. Remus hurriedly explained the situation to them, and Biller pointed at them.

"Get back in your offices, both of you, we can't risk either of you being captured if this is just a large diversion. We'll seal off The Ministry, and no one will be able to get in or out. Let's go Remus." Biller stopped to speak to one of his aides for a few seconds on the way out, and they made their way to the Apparition point. When they got to the appointed spot outside Hogsmeade, they saw dozens of Aurors sprinting toward the village, and they ran to join them. From the time Remus left Dumbledore and Tonks to the time he returned to Hogsmeade took only three minutes.

Flashback three minutes:

Dumbledore and Tonks waited until Remus was clear, and saw him turn back to his human form and pop away. They came back around the building and immediately started firing Reducto at anyone who did not look familiar, which was pretty much everyone outside now. They did not see any werewolves, nor was Voldemort in sight at this time, but more Dark Marks had been launched into the air. The nearest muggle town was over 10 kilometers away, but there were enough Marks in the air that the Obliviators would be rather busy in a little while.

As Tonks and Dumbledore strode deliberately, and not willy-nilly, into the main area of the village, they saw Fred and George sprinting out of Honeydukes, they had refused to garrison Zonkos, firing Reducto like crazy at a half dozen Death Eaters who were pursuing them, hitting two of them in the chest area, while dodging return fire. Tonks ran up to stand by them as they finally halted and launched a series of Killing Curses, taking much better aim this time.

AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!

Fred and George had not used that curse yet against any regular humans, and together with Tonks' curse, it took the pursuers totally by surprise, killing all three they had aimed at. Dumbledore, who loathed using the Killing Curse, nonetheless launched his own at the survivor, killing him from a distance of 20 meters.

The sound of battle filled the air in the village, as Fred and George caught their breath and reported, as Tonks gathered up the stray wands and made sure that the two injured Death Eaters would never harm anyone again. Dumbledore hurried up to join them, the stress of the situation was now beginning to show on his face.

“We got two werewolves in Honeydukes, and then those guys came up the stairs from the basement and started firing. There was only the six of them as far as I know sir.” The old man knew full well about the Honeydukes passage into Hogwarts, and had had it sealed before the Fall term had begun. He could not tell the two apart, so he simply addressed them both, quickly.

“Thank you Fred, George, good work. Now let us help the others.”

They moved toward the sound of screaming at Gladrags, and they rushed up to find a pitched battle taking place outside the ruins of the building, which was now half in flames. There were five Order members, including Hestia and Kingsley, taking on an equal number of Death Eaters, and four werewolves, including Edward Grant. Everyone was using Avada Kedavra, except the werewolves, who were advancing closer with every second. If Harry and his classmates had been able to see this small battle, they would have more fully grasped why Professor Ripley had them spend at least two classes a month on dodging spells. No one had yet fallen from the human side, though there seemed to be the bodies of at least two werewolves in the non-burning part of the wreckage.

Dumbledore was a little tired and stressed, but getting angrier with every heartbeat. He aimed a burst of magical energy at the nearest

werewolf, exploding his head open. Grant was on the verge of leaping upon Jones when he saw this in the corner of his eye.....so he somehow sped up, and tackled her, ripping her open with his claws, as an aghast Tonks and Kingsley started madly firing killing curses at him. It was to no avail, it was just the right angle for him to use her as a human shield, and he let a howl out into the air.....he had seen a new threat approaching.

The Aurors had arrived, and were yelling battle cries as they sprinted the half kilometer into the town, firing curses as soon as they got remotely in range of anyone in a mask or not wearing a robe of some sort. Sarah Westbrook and Rob Graham, who had assisted Biller at the Dursleys that night back in July, were at the head of the column as they crashed into a large force of Death Eaters coming up to meet them from Scrivenshafts. The Death Eaters still had their masks on, but among them were the three Lestranges as well as both Malfoys, and to a person all of them were amazed that the Aurors had responded this quickly. Apparently they had not considered that someone might get out of the village non-magically and warn The Ministry.

There is something a Darwinian selection process when an army, as the Aurors more or less were, loses a battle as badly as they had at the trial. The survivors tend to be hardened by the experience, and they also tend to fight a little dirtier the next time.....and that was the case here. This was the first pitched battle in magical Britain in over 15 years, and the Death Eaters came up on the short end of the stick in the end, as the Aurors fought with a passion and a fervor that amazed even themselves when they looked back on it. Westbrook personally took out two Death Eaters and a retreating werewolf, and was taking aim at another Death Eater when more fireworks shot into the sky. This was a retreat signal, or so it seemed, because soon the Death Eaters were collapsing back toward the Hog's Head Pub as quickly as they could without getting mass Killing Curses in the back.

A few Aurors pursued them, but there were enough Death Eaters fighting the rearguard to make this take an unpleasant and hazardous one. Rob Graham quietly pursued the fleeing enemy, not firing at them, but wanting to see where they went and how they got out. He peeked around the Hog's Head and saw a collection of Death Eaters

taking portkeys from a small Wizard with a silver hand, Pettigrew, from what he had heard. There looked to be about three dozen Death Eaters leaving, and he took the opportunity, as the last ones were leaving, to take a potshot at one of them.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

He hit one square in the back of the head right as he and three others disappeared. Rob didn't know it, and never would, but he had just killed Walden Macnair, one of the senior Death Eaters, and cutter of Hermione back in the DOM.

He ran back to find the battle over, less than 10 minutes after it had begun. Biller and Remus were with Dumbledore and the others now, and Graham reported to his boss.

“I counted about 35 Death Eaters retreating by the Hog's Head Pub, a Wizard with a silver hand was organizing them and their portkeys. I got one of them as he or she disappeared, but I couldn't tell you who it was.” Biller had already detailed people to sift through the bodies and find out how many casualties there were for the three sides.

“Rob, get back to The Ministry and inform Bones and The Minister that the battle is over. Tell them I said to still stay there, but the danger has likely passed. I will be there shortly with a full report.”

“Right Travis.” He started jogging toward the edge of the village, as the wards were still up. More people were coming up to them now, including Molly, Arthur, and Bill. None of them appeared seriously hurt, although Molly was holding her left arm.

“Where are Fred and George, are they all right?” The twins were helping out with the body counting, and soon appeared, to the relief of their family, as Molly and Arthur ran up to them. Tonks walked quietly up to Bill.

“Your brothers did really well Bill, they took out at least a trio of werewolves and a pair of Death Eaters. You should be proud of

them.” Bill looked at his brothers, calm and cool expressions on their faces. He patted Tonks on the shoulder, and went to join his family.

“I already was Tonks, but thank you.”

Auror Nelson DeMille, one of the senior Crew leaders, came up to Travis with his body count report.

“Travis, we have a total count of 14 Death Eaters killed, no wounded; 26 werewolves dead, no wounded; and four Order members killed, and a couple wounded, including Mrs. Weasley. One of the Auror members was Hestia Jones. No current Aurors were killed or wounded.” Hestia Jones had left the Auror Command earlier in the fall to join the Order full-time, Dumbledore providing a substitute paycheck out of his own funds. She had still been a member of the Dark Force Defense League, and had resumed many of her old duties, though without official Auror status.

It was a rout, a debacle, and Voldemort and Fenrir Greyback would not be pleased, they had lost troops at a ratio of 10 to 1. The Light Side had finally regained the initiative, and some of its swagger back, after 18 long months in retreat. The Aurors’ confidence grew leaps and bounds, and tales of this battle would be immediately spread around at the Auror Academy on the Isle of Man. No longer would they be the hound dog bunch of the last couple of months.

Bill personally supervised the cleanup of the bodies, both friend and foe, and saw that only three buildings had been completely destroyed: Gladrags, Zonkos, and the Shrieking Shack, though no battle had taken place at the latter location. Other buildings were somewhat damaged, and it would be a long debate within The Ministry of the next few weeks on whether or not to even start rebuilding the village, given the war and its ease as a target.

The Order of the Phoenix had a full meeting that night in one of the Hogwarts conference rooms. They mourned the losses of Hestia Jones, Daedulus Diggle, Marcus Griffin, and Eliza Archer.....whose brother Castor had fought on the other side this day, as he was a werewolf, though no one in the Order knew this, but overall the talk

was upbeat and proud, of the way they had fought. Much discussion was made of Snape, and how badly he would be punished. After seeing how the Death Eaters had come into the battle, even Dumbledore was hardening his heart against his former protégé.

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

Early evening GMT

There was no large meeting of the Death Eater council, only Voldemort, Snape, and Pettigrew. Wormtail had not been involved in the fighting, just in the signaling, while Snape had joined his Master here at the Manor. The bad man did not even wait for Snape to sit down before:

CRUCIO!

He held it for 15 seconds.

“I guess you were not very convincing Snape!” He motioned for Wormtail to join him, and the rat did so with great pleasure.

CRUCIO! CRUCIO!

They worked Snape over for about 10 minutes, with a lot of screaming, before Voldemort decided that enough was enough. A barely conscious Snape was placed in a chair and Voldemort went rampaging through his mind and still found no treachery in the man, only incompetence.

“Fetch one of his Sleeping Draughts.” The rat hurried out and returned within a minute to find his Master Obliviating knowledge of the torture from Snape’s mind.

“We need this bungler too much right now to have him turn on us. Start beating the bushes for another Potion’s Master though. The next time I torture this fool I might not have so much self control.”

“Yes Master.” Pettigrew administered the vial to his rival, and Snape’s eyes finally closed.

Saturday, December 14, 1996

10 am

Dining Hall

The Junior and Senior students had assembled to hear Murray’s instructions for their Flackter Alley trip. She stood up at the back of the room and waved her hands for quiet.

“Okay folks, you all remember my spiel from October?” A hundred heads nodded.

“Good, just pretend I’ve said it again. Be safe and have fun, see you all at dinner.” The students lined up to get their portkeys and as Harry and company came up to get theirs, Murray gave him a serious look.

“Be careful today Harry, be on your guard.”

“I’m never off it ma’am, we’ll be fine.” Said with more confidence than he felt perhaps. He knew Voldemort would be angry after the previous day’s events, and he would never be in more danger here in America than he would be now. The night before, after hearing the news from Fred and George, he had taught the scanning spell to Reiko, figuring that they both could keep an eye out during their time in muggle Milwaukee.

The seven of them, including Drew, took their wild ride into Flackter Alley without complications.....meaning that no one hurled at the end. This is worth mentioning because after the last visit in October for the Sunday group, one big story was that a few of the Apprentice students, fourth years, had not taken well to their first portkey rides, and blew chunks in a quite spectacular way. Remember, Scourgify and vomit do not interact well together.

The bank was first up, as always, and then it was Christmas shopping time. The gang had negotiated at dinner the night before over presents and dollar amounts, and set a limit of \$15 per person, though boyfriends and girlfriends were exempt from that obviously. Harry had a huge list of people to buy for, as he wanted to find stuff that was 'American-ish' for his friends back in Britain, and so withdrew the most amount of money. He didn't figure to find that in Flackter though, and plans were made to visit the large mall down the road from the gateway. The seven of them, once out of the bank, left Flackter and walked through the door to muggle Milwaukee.

Their first trip though, was to a movie theater, something that they had not done on their last two trips. Jonas, the big sports fan, had seen countless advertisements during the Thanksgiving Holiday for Jerry Maguire, the new Tom Cruise film, and had talked them all into going. They got their lunch at the concession stands and Harry saw only his second movie ever on the big screen, the first being Independence Day while on the lam in muggle London in July. They had a great time, all of them loving the movie, and Harry was wondering out loud about putting a big screen television inside his trunk, the bigger the better. They talked him out of buying a television and accessories this day, but it was unclear whether he was convinced or just did not want to argue about it at this time.

Next stop was clothes, for the ladies anyway, as the three of them were all buying outfits for each other and openly mocking the price limits they had agreed to less than 18 hours earlier. Sophie and Claudia had spent relatively little during the last Flackter trip, so as to save up for this, though their scholarships really were fully functional, as there was bump in spending money for the Christmas season. Reiko had been slipped some cash by Harry, and while Sophie was in the dressing room trying something on, had quickly picked up a few things that she had seen Sophie eyeing on the last trip. When Sophie came out, she was none the wiser, as Reiko had walked outside and given the bag to Harry, who had delayed his CD buying to grab it, shrink it, and put it in his pocket. Reiko did have to talk her out of buying one dress though, and had to use a lot of cunning to do it, as her friend really liked it.

The guys stayed strictly to the plan, more or less, and they all just picked out a CD to give to the other three. No muss, no fuss, and no surprises come Christmas morning for the four young men. Harry had requested, and gotten, three of The Eagles discs that he didn't have. He had become a fan after trying one of them at the listening station in October, and had bought a few that day. Warrick, contrary to what some might think, was not into rap, 'too nasty' was his reason, he was more into jazz, and got some to his liking there from the guys. Harry too found that kind of music pretty relaxing at times, and the two of them often fell asleep listening to John Coltrane on the room's stereo. Drew and Jonas, in one piece of harmony that had always marked their tenure as roommates, were both into REM and The Cure and acts like that, so they got a nice selection of discs from that category. The ladies had hounded them the night before into making their planned CD purchases into presents opened on Christmas, so they would have to wait to listen to their booty. They delighted in making the purchases, saying that the royalties that the Boston government got from the sales would buy a new case of toilet paper for the bathrooms, or perhaps give Caretaker Riley Poole enough money for a decent haircut. This whole process only took an hour, and the boys only had to wait about 15 minutes for the others.

That only left presents for the women, and they figured to get those at the mall. While waiting outside the boutique, Warrick was stressing about what to get for Reiko, and railed at Harry for not getting Sophie to do the same kind of spying on Reiko.

"But Warrick mate, that would give the game up that I was doing it for her, and would ruin the surprise, and my trademark with her has kind of gotten to be surprises."

"We could have found a way around it."

"Get your own ideas Warrick for crying out loud, you've been with her for a year."

"It's easy for you Jonas, you don't have to worry about buying gifts for your girl of the day."

“Convenient isn’t it?” The four of them laughed, but in truth Warrick had always envied Jonas his popularity with the girls. Reiko was not his first girlfriend at Great Lakes, but was the only one to have lasted past three months, with this that and the other thing always breaking them up. Jonas, to his credit, made a point of not rubbing in his success, and was not prone to bragging, which the women of Great Lakes knew about, and only added to his appeal. Jonas always said he was looking for the right girl to start a relationship, and was in fact a little openly envious of Warrick’s and Harry’s stable relationships, or so he said. Drew did not have a steady girlfriend, but had his date to the Christmas Dance all lined up, and had also bought a CD for her.

The girls exited with shopping bags full, and once outside, the boys formed a circle blocking them from view as Reiko shrunk the bags and handed them back to be pocketed. She had a huge grin on her face as she did so:

“My first magic in Milwaukee, this is so cool.” Sophie slung her arm around her roommate.

“You guys are so lucky, I can’t wait to be able to do magic anywhere I want.”

“Just a few short months away now.” Drew, whose birthday was in January, was curious about something.

“Harry, what spell did you first use when you got legal?”

“I burned my Hogwarts robes in the trash can using Incendio, then I did a duplicating spell on my emancipation document.” He said this with such a sense of satisfaction that they all laughed. They had all seen the results of the second spell, as the petition had been framed and was in the living room of his trunk. He hadn’t kept the robe ashes though, he had sprinkled them on his bed at the Dursleys.....then wet it down with a fire hose spell. The resulting smell was not pleasant, though unfortunately Harry had not witnessed Petunia’s reaction, but he could imagine it..

The next, and likely last, stop was the large mall down the street. They still had about three hours before the portkey home, but the clock was still ticking and there were many presents to buy. They entered the mall from a different entrance than the last time, and Harry saw a store that had escaped him the first two times: a novelty store that sold knick knacks and other odd stuff. He decided that this was ideal for at least Arthur and the twins, so he wandered in. He had never been in a store like this before, and was immediately glad he was in there now. He looked around and saw that none of the others had followed him in, so he started poking around.

Unfortunately he had to forgo the lava lamps, as they worked with batteries and/or electricity, neither of which would work in the shop or The Burrow. One of the first things he stumbled upon was a glow in the dark fish tank, one that did not use any sort of muggle power. It was pretty big, and Harry thought it would be perfect for The Burrow's living room. He found an Einstein poster to give to Hermione, Einstein was dressed in a Milwaukee Buck's uniform, but he figured she would understand and have a laugh about it. He found a few things that would be good for Bill and Charlie, but nothing that really fit the twins or the others. He walked up to the clerk and made sure that there would be more than one aquarium, in case there was a run of them before he left the mall. The clerk assured him that there would be one waiting for him.

He left the store, and came upon Sophie and Reiko, who had come back to look for him.

"We were wondering where you got off to."

"Just picking up some stuff for some of the Weasleys and Hermione." After showing them what he had gotten, they moved off to the food court for some snacks.

There was a sporting goods shop that Jonas and Warrick were always talking about, and Harry picked up some soccer stuff there to give to Ginny and Dean. The new American soccer league, MLS, had started earlier in the year, and he figured that more soccer posters in the dorm might irritate Ron, so he made a point to pick the gaudiest

ones. Neville's present was a little tougher, as he did not know him as well as the others back there, aside from Luna. She was easy to shop for, he had asked Sophie to buy her the weirdest, most offbeat dress in the boutique. It was a steal too, a multi-colored thing that he would have never let Sophie live down if she wore it, but it suited Luna. He had decided on a subscription to The Chronicle for Remus, thinking he might enjoy the contrast with The Daily Prophet.

There was a large chain bookstore in the mall as well, and Harry bought a copy of 'How to Win Friends and Influence People' , for a nice gift for Dumbledore. He also got Hermione a couple of books on American folklore and myth, thinking she would be into that kind of thing.

"You're buying an awful lot for that girl Harry." Warrick was tsk tsking him in front of the others.

"Five months ago I thought she had betrayed me to Dumbledore over the last few years, I have a guilty conscience okay?" The others started roaring with laughter, and Harry was fighting back a smile.

"Besides, Ron will screw up his present somehow, and I have to make sure she gets something decent from someone not her parents." Sophie again dissolved into giggles, she loved hearing about Ron and his difficulties.

All that was left in Britain to buy for was Neville and Ron, and he couldn't think of anything right there to get them. He and Sophie moved off into the calendars section, and Harry picked out one each for all of his British friends. Sophie had a thought.

"Give them one roundtrip portkey to the island, for use anytime during the year." That wasn't a half bad idea for Neville, as he and Luna would be discreet about it. They didn't need to know about the trunk system, and they would probably appreciate the time alone together. It wouldn't work for Ron though, but Harry had a different notion along those same lines.

“That’s an excellent idea my dear.” He kissed her.

“I’m going to use that for Neville, but not Ron. Ron I’m going to get him a written promise of a muggle plane ticket, round-trip, anywhere in the world. All he will have to do is tell me when and where.”

“But not necessarily here though?”

“I don’t know, I might have them over next summer if I can get Murray to okay it. But I would use the trunk then, I’ll figure out some kind of security arrangement for it. No, this ticket would be for tourism, if he and Hermione want to go, I’ll get her one too. I’ll give the poster and the books to Arthur, it’ll confuse the hell out of him.”

“So who do you have left now?”

“Just Claudia and Reiko.” She looked confused.

“You got mine already? When? You didn’t spend too much did you?”

“These are all good question Sophie.” He walked away calmly, and she scurried after him, peppering him with questions that he had no intention of answering. He managed to stop her before she started checking his coat pockets though.

“All I’ll say is that yes, I have gotten most of your presents, but I won’t say what, or how much more. Nor do you want me to.” Sadly, that did not stop her, but Harry was firm and resolute for once with her, and in the end, she agreed to stop asking.

Harry wound up just asking Claudia and Reiko if there was anything in particular that they wanted. Claudia asked for a history book that she had had her eye on in the Barnes and Noble they had been in, while Reiko had been eyeing a toy store in the corner near Harry’s first stop, and said that she would love it if he would buy her a couple of board games. Both purchases violated the spending limit, but Harry flat out told them he could care less about that. After a stop at a drugstore, so the ladies could pick up some makeup and other female

items, they were off. They picked up Harry's new aquariums on their way out.....yes, plural, he decided that he wanted one for himself as well, to brighten up the trunk. They were heavy suckers, and another circle was formed so that he could shrink them down to be able to carry them properly.

At no point during the trip did the teenagers notice the tourists taking pictures of them, Harry had so been concentrating on his shopping and what to get people, that he had only once scanned the immediate area for other wizards, and had missed the two that were tailing him and his friends. They got a dozen rolls of film, and had gotten close enough they could figure out who was who in the gang. Voldemort would be very pleased with them they thought, as they slowly broke off visual contact with Potter, and made their way to the taxi stand, where they would soon be bound for the airport.

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

6:45 pm

Cortez Room 6B

The four guys were milling around, trying to kill time before picking up their girlfriends. Warrick was giving himself a haircut in the mirror. Usually he was bald, but lately had started growing his hair out a little, which lasted about three weeks until Reiko complained that she missed the smoothness. Hence the haircut, using his wand and a Shaving Charm. Rick and Terry were slicking back their hair, and Harry was just watching, amused by it all. His hair was pretty much as it had always been, and he no longer even tried anything with it. This was the beauty of dress robes for guys, they had little else to do to get ready, Rick wasn't even wearing a clean shirt underneath. Harry was wearing his purple robes, having threatened up until lunchtime to wear the translucent green ones that he had gotten the same day. The other five threatened mass retribution if he did so though, and he relented, reluctantly.....he kind of dug them if truth be told.

"Will you girls get ready already?" Rick was ready with a retort, he had seen Harry's mocking smile in his mirror.

“You know not all of us have a bird’s nest for hair like you do, we have to do a little work on ours.” Harry grinned.

“It’s low maintenance.” Rick and Terry rolled their eyes as they said their goodbyes, and went to the Lounge to wait for their girlfriends. Warrick was now bald and straightening up his robes, which were pearl white, he loved the contrast.

“You ready to go dude?”

“Just about. Winky!” Winky popped in with camera in hand.

“Just a couple here, then come with us to the Lounge please.” The two friends stood next to each other, no arms around or anything like that for these guys, and Winky did not wait for Cheese, as she snapped off a pair of pictures. The fellows collected their corsages and exited the room.

“How long do you think they’ll make us wait?” They walked slowly down the hallway toward the Lounge.

“I don’t know dude, Reiko only made me wait 10 minutes last year.”

“Who did Sophie go with?” Harry had never remembered to ask that question when he and Sophie were alone.

“She and Claudia went together, and they paired up with Reiko and I, and Jonas and his date, whose name is escaping me at the moment.”

“No really? I never would have figured that.”

“It’s like picking jellybeans from a jar for that boy. What’s her name this time? The one he’s going with?”

“Jane somebody, she’s a Transition from Jefferson I think. I don’t know, I’ve only met her once.”

“Oh yeah, the one on the Quodpot team, I should have figured. Let’s see if this one lasts past tonight.”

They arrived in a very busy Lounge to find that no one was waiting for them, big surprise. The three televisions were being monopolized by a lot of younger students, who finally got to choose the programming, since most of the two youngest years could not be bothered to go to the festivities. The rest of the room was filled with dressed up teenagers, mostly guys, as they waited for their partners. The Lounge door was open for the time being, and Claudia and her date walked in, Claudia being one of those on-time freaks who hates to be kept waiting. She had still refused to tell them in advance who her date was, only that she had one, and in fact had not been the asker.

It turned out that her date was Ray Elwood, from Defense Class and Harry’s fellow Seeker. They walked in not holding hands, but seeming at least somewhat comfortable around each other. Harry now remembered that Ray was in the History Club with her. Claudia had on robes of a kind of gold color, and her hair was swept up in some kind of knot, rather than her usual ponytail. She was not wearing any makeup, and no jewelry beyond a thin necklace that she always had on. In truth, Harry thought, she looked much more attractive that she usually did, when she made relatively little effort. She was not ugly by any means, just average.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here? Ray, you have been holding out on us Casanova.” The other boy blushed a bit. Harry and Ray did not know each other much beyond class, but he felt comfortable enough to say something snarky around him. Warrick barely knew him at all, but remembered him from classes and the Quidditch game.

“She made me promise not to tell you guys.”

“And I know you were thinking that I was bluffing, that I would be going by myself.” Harry and Warrick in fact had thought that, but were not quite so stupid as to say so in front of her. They simply adopted placid smiles, and shook Ray’s hand heartily.

“Welcome to the club mate, do we need to tell you to treat our lady Claudia right?” She gave the two of them a mock glare.

“Don’t go there guys, don’t even try it.”

“Try what, I don’t know what you’re on about.” That was Warrick, in his best Monty Python impersonation. He had been around Harry for long enough that he had a British accent down pretty pat. A further retort from Claudia was preempted by Jonas and his date coming through the door. She was redhead, rather small and petite, and wearing fuchsia colored robes.

“Hey there guys, you remember Jane Aubrey don’t you?” Smile were exchanged, and even Claudia was friendly to the younger girl, who was a bit nervous being with the Quod God, and with his tight knit friends, though the other three guys could not help but noticed how attractive she was. After a couple of minutes of chitchatting, Reiko and Sophie made their appearance, to catcalls of ‘Finally’ and ‘It’s about time.’ from everyone except Harry and Warrick, who simply smiled really big at the ladies, and sensibly made no moves to look at their watches.

Reiko was wearing maroon colored robes that were only a few shades away from Harry’s own. Her long hair was flowing freely behind her, and she wore a little more makeup than usual, but it looked great on her. Warrick walked up to her and pinned the corsage.

“Happy One Year Anniversary baby.” They hugged tightly, and everyone went a little gooey inside watching it. Actually their anniversary had been two days before, due to the vagaries of the calendar and leap years and such, but they had agreed beforehand that this was much more romantic and stylish.

Sophie, meanwhile, was wearing light blue robes that she had picked out last spring during the last Flackter trip of that term. Her light brown hair was braided down the back and loop tied, and she looked so good Harry was half tempted to say to hell with the dance and

kidnap her down to the trunk. He resisted though, and pinned the corsage, while whispering.

“You look so beautiful, do we really have to go to the dance?”

“You better believe it mister, do you know how long it took me to get ready?”

“Fine, fine, we’ll dance our feet off.” She grinned at him.

“Then we’ll go into the trunk.” They exchanged a giggle, and all assembled knew what the gist was. Winky did her picture thing with all the couples, pausing twice to reload film. They didn’t do a group shot, the party was not totally complete. Sophie looked at Jonas.

“Is Drew meeting us in there?”

“He is, he should already be there I think. He left right before we did, he said he and his date would stake out a big table for us.” The gang, plus two, made their way to the Dining Hall. Winky and her camera were trailing behind as she took some random shots of people on their way to the dance. There was no student newspaper or yearbook or anything like that, but no one else seemed to be taking any photos, so Winky thought she might give them to Harry to post on the bulletin boards.

They got to the dance and found the place about half full, with it filling up more by the minute. The decorations were mainly Christmas in nature, with a large Christmas tree right in the middle of the room, decorated to the hilt. The tables were the same as ever, with red and green tablecloths spread over them, and fancy dinner wear topping them. Drew and his date, who turned out to be a Jefferson Senior named Kristy Penman, were holding down in the corner at a table just big enough for the ten of them. Kristy was introduced all around, as the non-Jeffersonians were not familiar with her, and Winky took a number of group pictures. Murray, who was looking very stylish in her pink dress robes, walked over to them. She had only met Winky the once, right at the beginning, but knew this wasn’t Dobby.

“Harry, I was wondering if we might borrow Winky for the night, somehow I forgot to designate a photographer for the dance. Winky, if we get you enough film, would you mind taking pictures for us?” Harry was nodding at the idea, and Winky smiled shyly.

“Yes Professor ma’am, I would be happy to.”

“Terrific, come with me and we will stock you up with film. Have a good time folks.” The two of them went away, chatting as they did. Dinner was served a few minutes later, as a buffet was set up along the west wall, loaded with anything and everything that someone could want to eat. It was like a potluck, except none of the kids needed to bring a dish to pass. Once loaded up with food, they retreated to the table, which Harry had been guarding for them. Music was playing over the speakers, from a stereo setup it sounded like, at least it was not the RWA, Radio Wizard America.

The ten teenagers spent the hour that ensued chatting amiably, and getting to know the three new people. Jane, Jonas’ date, wound up contributing relatively little to the conversation, uncomfortable about being in this company. She was no dunce though, and the little she did say supported that, so she was not simply one of Jonas’ Quod groupies, well not JUST one of them anyway. The dancing had not started yet, so she sat there quietly eating her food. Ray had at least one class with all of the gang, and had been Proctor House’s biggest buyer of WWW products, which had endeared him to Harry. Kristy had just gotten word that morning at mail call that she had gotten accepted into Harvard, her ghost school grades and test scores had gotten her in easily.

“Yeah, it was weird when I took my SAT’s, it was at the muggle high school in Marquette, and there were about a dozen of us there. Everyone was looking at us strangely, who were these geeks with coats and ties, and a skirt in my case.” All Great Lakes students were registered at a ghost school named Great Lakes Preparatory Institute, just the changing of one word. They received muggle grades that reflected their magical marks at GLMI. That said, any students wanting to possibly go to muggle university had to actually take the SAT, the college entrance examination, themselves, live and in color.

This would separate out the wheat from the chaff. This was usually done in March of their Junior years, and some of Sophie's and Claudia's outside reading was dealing with prep work for the SAT, and was going to take up some of their free time over the break, as teachers did not assign homework over it. Harry and Jonas had no interest in continuing their educations past June 1998, with Quidditch/WWW and Quodpot calling them respectively. Reiko and Warrick were still waffling though, and were probably going to take the tests just to see what their options were.

The dancing began soon after, but Warrick had a quick question first.

"Harry, Sophie, do we need to stay away from the punch bowl tonight?" The table all started laughing, as it was explained to the newcomers about the minds behind the Halloween mayhem.

"You're fine folks, don't worry. Harry and I decided that no dress robes needed punch on them. Right Harry?" Harry was looking mock mutinous listening to this.

"Um yeah, WE decided. Yep, you betcha." They had actually debated it, but did not want to draw Murray's wrath. Harry had not protested, too much.

The ten of them headed out to the dance floor, and Harry and Sophie spent most of the rest of the evening dancing, mostly with each other, but with other members of the gang and their dates as well. Harry and Warrick both spent a dance each with Jane Aubrey trying to her to say more than 'hello', but failed miserably. Reiko had to be talked out of going over to a date-less, but still at the dance, Joe Clancy and asking for a turn around the floor. It was unclear how heinous her intentions were, but Warrick was the voice of reason for once in his life. Besides, he had already arranged for Dobby to sneak into Clancy's room and rearrange his furniture while the dance was going on. The little elf was to open the door from the inside and leave it open, covering his tracks.

At the halfway point, Harry had a dance with Claudia, and felt free to inquire about Ray.

“So is this just a date to the dance, or am I going to be inducting our man Ray into the trunk soon?” Claudia had that look on her face now.

“It’s just a date, so don’t get any ideas.”

“Gee, why would we get any ideas?”

“He is a very nice guy, but neither of us are looking for a relationship. I think he has a muggle girl back in West Virginia that he is interested in.”

“Why is that Claudia? Why are you so opposed to having a boyfriend?” Harry and Claudia spent practically no time alone, and Sophie and Reiko had told him that it was Claudia’s reasons to tell, not theirs.

“There’s too much pressure at our age Harry, too much pressure to be pretty, to be popular. I have enough to deal with, and I don’t want to take all that on. I mean Sophie and Reiko can handle it, but I just don’t want to.”

“I guess I don’t blame you.”

“I mean it’s easy for you, you’re popular without having to try.” Whoa, danger Will Robinson, Harry did not like the sound of that.

“Hang on a second there Claudia. I’m popular, if in fact I really am, because I’m a novelty, the English kid with the funny accent who has access to a cool joke shop.” Harry had no doubt in his mind that WWW was a big reason that he got along with most people, plus it had allowed him to meet and talk to kids that he never would have otherwise, a big difference from Hogwarts. Even if the twins were to allow Ron to sell for them, they mostly used Ginny, he couldn’t see his friend interacting with all different Houses in that way.

“That’s my point, and I don’t begrudge you any of that, or having Sophie fall for you in a matter of hours. I just don’t want it for myself,

or at least I don't want to make so much effort. Things like that do not come easily for me." Now it seemed they were talking about two subjects: popularity and romance, and the two did not necessarily have to be linked, in Harry's mind anyway. He decided to bypass a popularity argument that he could never win.

"So you're going to wait until university to start dating?"

"That's the plan, but hey, I'll admit that if someone comes along that knocks my socks off, I'll reconsider. Like Sophie did with you, she was saying the same things that I just did only a few months ago." Sophie had hinted along those lines, true.

"All right, all right, I won't bug you about it. I was just curious is all." She gave him a smile, and the dance ended. The others were over by the punch bowl, and the two of them slowly wandered over to join them.

"It's okay, I've been wondering why it's taken you so long to ask me. You're damn polite you know, clearly Warrick and Jonas have not rubbed off on you. Warrick is like 'when are you going to get a guy?' I mean he's been asking on the average of once a week for years." Harry had little trouble believing that.

"I would love to say that I'm polite because of Sophie's influence, but Hermione is probably the one to thank for that. She had this look that she would give Ron and I when we did something rude or nasty. I guess I just hated having that look directed at me. It didn't do as much for Ron though, he would just ignore it. Makes me wonder how she puts up with him as a boyfriend."

"All 11 year old boys should have a female buddy to teach them things like that."

"I'm a better guy for it I think." Harry's summer opinion of Hermione, which had been so negative, had softened to the point of being marshmallow like in the ensuing months. He was remembering all the good things about their time together, rather than his nitpicky issues

with her in the last couple of years. After some non-pranked punch, they went back out dancing, with their own dates this time.

“So you and Claudia seemed to spend more time talking than dancing.”

“We finally had the talk about why she doesn’t want a boyfriend.”

“Ahhhh, I figured that was it. Enlightening for you?”

“Pretty much, she said that you had the same issues before you met me.” She laughed a little at hearing that.

“I don’t know about that, but she’s not totally wrong. Anyway, you fell into my lap, so to speak.”

“Yes I did, and speaking of that, how much longer do we have to hang around here? It’s 9:30 already for crying out loud.” The dance was scheduled to last until 11 pm, though most would trickle out before then. There was no hard and fast curfew at Great Lakes normally. The younger students were encouraged by peer pressure to show good sense, rather than a ‘lights out at midnight approach’.

“Okay, okay. We’ll go after this dance.” She did not seem any more eager to stay than he did, given her tone of voice. After another dance, one of Sophie’s favorite songs had come on, they made their excuses and decamped to the trunk, where much half clothed frolicking ensued. After awhile, when they were entangled on the couch, Harry got curious about what the others were doing. His wand was nowhere near, but the Map was on his writing desk. He reached out his hand:

Accio Map!

He was getting a lot better at wandless magic, but the Summoning Spell was still his bread and butter. The Map flew over, and Harry solemnly swore that he was up to no good.

“You’re a nosy sucker.”

“Hey, they know where we are don’t they? I’m half tempted to do some pranking right now anyway.” They were now sitting up, and Sophie was looking at the Map too.

“Okay fine, you’ve got me curious, where are they?” He peered first at the dorm rooms.

“Well my other roommates are now going at it with their girlfriends right upstairs here, those pairs of dots are awfully close together. I’m dreading the day I walk into an orgy in there, I won’t know who to hex first.....let’s see now, Drew and Kristy are in the Jefferson Lounge, looks like the night is still going for them. Jonas and Jane, yep, they’re in his room all right, I hope they’re having fun, she’s not really a conversationalist.” Sophie whacked him on the arm.

“Hey, I tried for a whole dance and couldn’t get anything more than a one word answer to any question. Warrick and Drew too, and if you can find three more disparate personality types than the three of us, good luck.” She just shook her head and laughed.

“What about Reiko and Warrick? Look in the basement.” They did, and.....yes, the two were in the basement, in a small storage room off in the corner.

“Oh yes, the secret hideaway. Oh this is going to be good.”

“Not tonight though Harry, let them have some fun without you nailing them.....well without us nailing them anyway.” Harry reacted with mock outrage.

“What do you mean? They’ve probably had a year down there without being interrupted, one night of mayhem won’t kill them.” Sophie moved her hand slightly.

“Yeah, but we have better things to do, don’t we?” Halftime was over it seemed, and Harry quickly banished the Map back to his desk.

“I still say they’re getting off light.” Talking ceased for the time being.

Everyone took their portkeys back the next morning, right on schedule. That night, the gang, along with the Forrester, Steele, and Aylesworth parents, all had an early dinner at a nice steakhouse in Chicago, which was Harry’s Christmas present to the Forrester’s especially, much as they protested. This was followed by flooing back to Indianapolis for a Pacers v. Nets basketball game, courtesy of tickets provided by Uncle Antonio. After the game, Harry met the NBA player, a closet wizard, who had used time turners to go between Great Lakes, his alma mater in the magical world, and his muggle high school, where he could play basketball. He was, officially, the only magical person to be playing big time muggle professional sports, and he promised to tell Harry more about it at Christmas during dinner.

Friday, December 20, 1996

Springfield, Illinois

5:45 pm

Harry and Warrick emerged from the floo point, at a children’s park about a mile from their destination. The girls were in Tulsa for the evening, doing some shopping and having a ‘girls night out’, and Warrick’s parents were at some kind of charity function that the two boys had paid little attention to the details about. So they had a free evening, and Harry had decided to give something a try. They consulted a map that Winky had obtained for them in Flackter Alley, and set off.....for Sophie’s family’s house. This was Harry’s idea of a creative Christmas present, a possible rapprochement for Sophie with them, or at least a shot at it. This was something he had only been plotting for a week or so, after thinking about Warrick and his family, and of course the Weasleys. He thought it was worth a try, and had coerced Warrick into joining him on the mission by promising him dinner. The six of them were due to leave for the island the next day and there would probably not be time to this before Christmas Day if they put it off.

The Weir residence was right off a main road, and quite easy to find with help from the map. As they approached the front door, they saw that lights were on all over the house, which was a relief, as they had been worried about the family being gone, out to a restaurant perhaps. Warrick took a look around and then stared at his friend.

“Just for the record, this a very bad idea.”

“If it was so bad you would have been able to talk me out of it.”

“Like that’s possible. Once you’ve got the bit between your teeth it’s pretty hard to dissuade you.”

“Just keep your objections to yourself while we’re in there, if we get in.” Harry did a quick and dirty scan of the house, but only found the Listening Charms Sophie had told him about. There was no evidence of any other magical people about, so Sophie’s brothers were not magical, as Harry had somewhat suspected.

“I know the score, don’t worry.” They were on the doorstep by now, and Warrick rang the doorbell. A few seconds later, a young man opened it, he appeared to be about five years older than they were. This would be the oldest brother, Jason, the one who was a Senior at Northwestern. He was the one Sophie wrote to the most, and the only one who had not initially cut her off.....though their letters were still done on the sly, as were her letters to the other brother, Ned. Sophie did not have any pictures of her family in her room. Harry had not asked, but naturally assumed it was just too painful for her.

“Hello, you must be Jason.” He looked at them quizzically.

“Yes I am, who are you?”

“I’m Harry Potter, this is Warrick Forrester.” Jason’s eyes got very big as he heard this, and looked behind them as he stepped outside and closed the door.

“Is Sophie here with you?” He sounded worried, this was not a good sign.

“No she isn’t, and she does not know that we’re here.” the other man looked a little relieved.

“What are you doing here?”

“We.....well, I want to talk to your parents if I can.” Warrick had nudged him at the ‘we’ part.

“Look, Sophie’s written me about both of you, but my parents.....” He was interrupted by the door cracking open, it was Ned.

“What’s going on Jason? Who are these guys?”

“Ned, this is Harry Potter and Warrick Forrester.” More eyes getting big, and Jason headed off the next question.

“No Ned, Sophie isn’t here. Where is she by the way?”

“She’s in Oklahoma, with her roommate and her family.”

“Reiko? That’s her name right?” Warrick made his first sally into the conversation.

“Yes it is, she’s my girlfriend. Her family takes Sophie in during the holidays.” He said this pointedly, as if to emphasize that at least someone did. Harry gave him a quick, but dirty look, this was not helping things. Warrick gave him an equally hard look back, reminding him that he had known and befriended Sophie long before Harry ever put a thought in his head to come to America. Jason took stock of this non-verbal argument, then broke it up by saying:

“Look guys, I can guess why you’re here, and while its pretty noble of you Harry, it’s also fruitless.”

“Why?”

“Because Ned and I have tried until we were blue in the face, and they will not budge. I think it’s just too late now guys.” He was looking nervously at the door, as if anticipating that his parents might soon wonder where their sons were.

“Do they know that you two are in contact with her?” Sophie sent a letter a month to each of them during the school year, Ned was now a freshman at the University of Illinois. Ned had originally followed his parents lead, but that only lasted a few months as Jason had worked hard on turning him.

“I don’t know dude, I really don’t. They know that I never approved of what they did to her, but that didn’t matter to them. They haven’t asked, and I haven’t told.” Jason had just cricked his neck for another look at the door, when it opened again. A man in his late 40’s appeared, tall with grey thinning hair. He smiled at his sons.

“Boys, it’s awfully cold out here to be chatting. Who are your friends?” Jason and Ned looked at each other blankly, they had no idea of what to do here. Harry decided to be proactive, and he reached his hand out:

“Hello sir, my name is Harry Potter, this is my friend Warrick Forrester.” Sophie’s father did not look as if he recognized their names, though Harry’s English accent made his eyebrows go up a little.

“Peter Weir, nice to meet you both.” He shook Harry’s outstretched hand, and repeated with Warrick.....who now had a slightly sick feeling at seeing his close friend’s father. He had been one of the first at school to see Sophie after she returned with then Headmaster Rydell, after she had been thrown out of this very house, for being magical. He was one of the ones, along with Reiko and a few others, who had comforted her that night as she cried her eyes out for hours, he had not seen her cry since. In the four years plus since that night, Sophie had never, in his hearing, harshly criticized her parents for what they had done, but Reiko and Warrick had long agreed that if they ever got a shot at payback, they would take it for her.....except that Warrick did not have his wand with him. As with all holidays, it

was stuck to his dresser until the day he and Harry were due to portkey back to school. Harry was the only one armed this day, and while Warrick would not put it past him to bring violence upon this man for what he had done, he knew that Harry was hoping beyond hope for diplomacy to work here.

“Are you boys friends of Ned’s? Why don’t we take this inside?” Harry smiled gratefully, not only was he cold, but getting in the front door was what he had figured would be the hard part.

“Thank you sir.” The five of them went inside, and all sat down in the living room. Sophie’s mother was not in evidence anywhere, so it was just the men folk.

“Mr. Weir, Warrick and I aren’t friends of Ned exactly.” He stopped there, and the Weir patriarch needed no other hints, as they were clearly too young to be friends of Jason.

“You are friends of my daughter.” Said flatly, with little emotion.

“Yes we are, though I am privileged to add the title of ‘boyfriend’ as well.” Another cold stare at them, but at least he was not trying to kick them out yet.....not that Harry was prepared to go quickly and quietly if that happened.

“Does she have something to say to us?”

“Not as such, no. Sophie doesn’t know that we are here.”

“So what do you want? Surely she has told you our terms for her return.” Harry could sense Warrick’s hostility growing by the second, but didn’t dare break eye contact with Peter while he had it.

“I was hoping, that over the course of four and a half years, that those terms might have softened a little.....or a lot.”

“Why would you assume that?”

“She’s your daughter Mr. Weir, she loves you and her mother to this day. Can you really say that you don’t love her?”

“She made a choice young man, and she has to live by that choice.” Harry stayed calm at considerable effort, and kept his tone soft.

“What kind of parent forces a 12 year old girl into that kind of choice?” He was rewarded with a flinch, but the man’s expression did not change.

“It should not have been too hard to choose her family over magic. I suppose your parents just sent you off to Wizard school without a second thought.” Harry and Warrick looked at each other.

“Well my parents died when I was a baby, but they were magical, and would have wanted me to follow in their footsteps.” He didn’t dare mention the Dursleys in this company.

“My parents are Wizards too Mr. Weir, and they had no problem with me maximizing my potential. I should tell you that they made it clear that if I didn’t want to go to Great Lakes, I didn’t have to.”

“Well that is well and good for the two of you, who grew up in that culture, but not for my daughter.” Just then, a woman who Harry supposed was Sophie’s mother appeared. She had the beginnings of a smile at seeing guests, but it froze when she saw the hard look on her husband’s face, and the worried looks of her sons.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that we had company.” She didn’t hear the doorbell? Harry found this to be a bit dubious. Harry and Warrick stood up.

“Hello ma’am, my name is Harry Potter and this Warrick Forrester. We’re boyfriend and friend, respectively, to Sophie.” The look on her face was priceless, she clearly had not been eavesdropping.

“Is Sophie all right? Has something happened?” Harry decided he had been overly polite long enough.

“Thank you for being the first one here to ask that question Mrs. Weir, but no, nothing is wrong with her.” The brothers looked a bit abashed, and even their father appeared to be a little uncomfortable after that salvo.

“And you two are here to try for a reconciliation?” Harry was liking her more by the second, especially compared to her husband. Now that he was staring at her, he noticed a strong resemblance between her and her daughter.

“Yes ma’am, that is our hope.” Warrick didn’t make a sound this time with the ‘our’ comment, but Peter had something to say.

“A reconciliation that will not be happening as long as she stays at that school.”

“What happens in 18 months after she graduates, and she’s third in our class, just so you know, a very gifted student.” No one seemed to have a good answer to that one, and Harry was a few seconds away from starting in with the threats, and then Peter stood up.

“I think it’s time you boys left. I suppose I can’t blame you for trying, but nothing has changed for any of us, and until it does, she will not be welcome back here.” Harry laid a hand on Warrick’s arm to forestall him from getting up. He eyed the Weirs for a moment, and things came together mentally.

“I mean it boys, you need to leave.” Harry made no moved to get up, but did take his wand out of his coat.....just to see what the reaction would be. The brothers looked curious, the mother troubled, and the father was enraged.

“Are you threatening me?”

“Not at all Mr. Weir, why would you think that me just pulling out my wand would be a threat? After all, Warrick hasn’t taken his out” That he couldn’t was not a detail that needed to be disclosed right about now.

“Because you’re not leaving after I told you to.”

“No we’re not. But we will leave if you can answer just one easy question.” Weir was conscious that he had lost control of the situation, but there was only one right answer here.

“Fine, what’s your question?”

“Which one of you is the squib? You, or your wife?” The brothers seemed to know what a squib was, and turned to stare at their parents. Mrs. Weir, whose first name was Wendy, went white, and Peter did not look much better. Warrick just stared at his roommate, and badly wanted to ask him how he had figured that out, but decided to wait until later to do so.

“You know, it didn’t hit me until after I sat down here, but I should have figured it out months ago. You see, Sophie has no idea why you turned on her like you did, and she could never come up with a good reason.....but she also mentioned that she never seemed to see her grandparents much, on either side. Neither of you are saying no to my question yet.”

Peter Weir just started pacing, and then turned to his ‘guests’. He was less hostile than before, but there was something in his eyes.

“How would you feel if you grew up in a wonderful environment, filled with amazing things.....but were only allowed to look, but not touch.....see, but not do. That was me, from age 11 on until now, and for the rest of my life.” Everyone was breathing very quietly as he said this, and the pain he obviously felt was palpable.

“I do understand sir, I was raised by my aunt, who hated the fact that her sister was a muggleborn witch, and could do all those things that she could not. She and her husband spent 10 years trying to stomp the magic out of me, sometimes literally. Believe me Mr. Weir, if anyone here understands where you’re coming from, it’s me.....but how is any of that your daughter’s fault?” Peter continued as if Harry had not even spoken.

“I dreaded the months up until Jason’s 11th birthday, and then he didn’t get a letter..... the same with Ned, no letter. I honestly thought we were in the clear. Then Sophie got hers, and to my parents’ old school no less. I tried, I really tried. Wendy and I decided to go along with it, Sophie had seen the letter and asked so many questions.....but I just couldn’t, I couldn’t do it in the end.”

“So you forced her into choosing between herself and her family.” That was not a question, and seemed to bring Weir out of his reverie.

“Yes we did, and I do not regret it. She left us, young man. She chose magic and her own desires over her family, and I stand by our choice.”

“I repeat my earlier question, can you honestly tell us that you don’t love your daughter?” Wendy Weir now had tears in her eyes, and the brothers were not far behind.

“There are times when love is not enough young man. Duty to family is just as important. Yes I love Sophie, and I always will.....but she will not cross this doorway with a wand in her hand, or anywhere else on her person.”

“That’s cold sir.”

“That’s your opinion, not that I care to hear any more of it. Now you said you would leave after I answered your question, and I have. Don’t make me call the police.” Harry and Warrick both started laughing, shocking the others, and between guffaws:.

“What would you tell them when they came? All we have to do is yell the word ‘Magic’ in front of them and the Aurors would come a running. That said, we are leaving. I suppose we should thank you for your time, but given how I feel about your daughter, I’ve used up all my politeness towards you.” Harry stood up, put his wand away, and walked to the door, followed closely by Warrick. They had just gotten outside when the door opened back up behind them, and Wendy and her sons stopped them.

“Boys.....is Sophie happy? Does she have a good life at that school?” A crack in the foundation, and Harry went right for the jugular.

“Yes she is happy ma’am, but nothing would make her happier than to hear from you. Just send her a Christmas card, your husband doesn’t have to know.” He pulled a pre-prepared slip of paper from his pocket, it had Great Lakes muggle mail drop address on it.

“Thank you boys.” She pocketed the paper, and walked quickly back inside. The brothers eyed the Wizards for a moment.

“I guess we should thank you for not giving us up in there, tell Sophie that we love her, and that we look forward to her next letter. Right Ned?”

“Right bro.....I’m glad she’s happy, and that you guys and your other friends are there for her. Jason and I will continue to do our best for her here, I promise.”

“Good enough.” Harry girded himself and shook hands with them, though Warrick declined, and was already halfway down the front walk. They walked back inside, as Harry jogged a bit to catch up with his friend. They started the walk back to the floo point, deciding that dinner could wait until they were back in Indianapolis.

“So was it worth it? Did you get what you wanted?”

“I did Warrick, yeah. I got an explanation, and that’s the best I could hope for.”

“I guess I have to agree with you on that. You didn’t really expect them to have a change of heart, did you?” Harry grimaced at his roommate.

“Of course not. I’m persuasive up to a point I suppose, but I’m not that good.”

“What are you going to tell Sophie?” Harry looked at him in surprise.

“The truth of course.”

“Maybe you should wait until after Christmas, you never know what this might do to her.” That was a thought, but with a giant problem attached to it.

“That won’t work, the brothers will surely write to her and tell her we were there, and I’ll bet you five bucks right now that her mom will send something.....and then you and I will get the big question of why we didn’t tell her right away. And while I will get most of the punishment, you won’t go unscathed mate.” Warrick acknowledged this.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. She wouldn’t stop at killing you, that’s for sure.” They spent the rest of the walk talking about restaurants, and how far they wanted to travel. Warrick may have lived in a muggle area, but he had no idea how to drive a car. It was part of the price he paid for staying at school the past three summers, it was a boon to his grades, which had improved by leaps and bounds.....but he did miss out on a few things.

They flooded back to the Forrester home, fully expecting it to be empty.....not quite.

Sophie, Claudia, Reiko, and Jonas were all in the living room watching television, or were before their heads turned toward the floo fireplace.....the Forresters had a floo fireplace and a real fireplace. Quite the conversation piece when muggle friends came by. Reiko was just bringing some drinks for them, they had the run of the fridge.

“Hey guys, we were wondering where you were. Doing some Christmas shopping?” Warrick’s look at Harry clearly communicated: ‘this was your idea, you proclaim it and defend it.’.

“Well we were shopping for Christmas of a sort I guess.” Warrick snorted.

“You are not helping Warrick. Well there is no easy way to say this, so I’ll just say it: We were in Springfield.”

Dead silence hit the room, and Jonas had the presence of mind to turn the television off. Sophie stood up, and Harry had so rarely seen her angry that he really couldn’t peg the signs yet.

“You saw my family?”

“We did, I wanted to see if there was any chance there.” He had half-heartedly decided to shield Warrick if he could.

“Why didn’t you tell me beforehand? No, scratch that, why didn’t you ask me first before you even went?” Okay, now she was getting angry, and Harry reflexively took a half step back.

“I didn’t want to get your hopes up, I didn’t want to have you dreading what I might come back with.” Harry’s voice was as calming as he could possibly make it, though he was very grateful that Sophie couldn’t use her wand right now.....though Reiko could, and she and Claudia weren’t looking too thrilled with him and Warrick right about now.

“So you met my parents.”

“We did, and your brothers, who seem like good guys by the way.” Sophie now sighed, and some of the anger was dissipating. Harry now took that half step back forward.

“So what happened?”

“Well the upshot is that your brothers are still on your side.....your mother seems very conflicted and perhaps willing to switch teams.....” He hesitated, and then barreled forward when she looked expectant.

“And your father is a squib.” More dead silence, as Sophie’s facial expression changed about four times inside as many seconds.

“I know I did not hear that right.”

“You did Sophie, and he admitted it right in front of us, and your mother and brothers. Your mother didn’t seem surprised.....well she seem surprised that he was fessing up to it anyway. Your brother were stunned.” Warrick decided to show some solidarity here.

“It was Harry who figured it out Sophie, he put stuff together and flat out asked him, and your dad gave us this spiel about stuff he missed out on, and that he tried to understand about your magic, and crap like that. He still doesn’t want you there without a wand though, but he seemed to be the only one there who felt that way.” Sophie was quiet now, and a tear was running from her left eye. Harry was unsure about whether or not he should go over to her, but decided to chance it, and walked over and took her hands in his.

“Sophie, I guess I just wanted you to have an explanation, one gotten without having to face any hostility yourself.” She stayed silent, and there were still hard looks coming from Reiko and Claudia, while Jonas had sidled up to Warrick and they were trading facial expressions.

“My mom looked conflicted you said?” The one piece of information Harry was going to leave out unless asked for was the possibility of a letter from the mother.

“As we were leaving, she asked us if you were happy, and safe. Your dad did most of the talking of course, but she did not look at all resolute. Your brothers didn’t say a word inside, but before and after we talked with your dad, they told us that they love you, and that they look forward to your next letter.” The tears were coming a bit harder now, but she was squeezing Harry’s hands, which meant that she could not slug him. She was quiet for a minute.

“Thank you for trying Harry, and you too Warrick.....a squib. I mean I believe you, and it does make a lot of sense in retrospect.. How did he keep all that a secret for so long?”

“How often did you see his parents growing up?”

“Two or three times maybe, they live in Seattle and Dad isn’t big on taking long trips.”

“They must have reached some kind of deal with your dad, or maybe he just shut them out.....seems to be something of a pattern with the guy.”

“You didn’t like him?” Harry made a face, and his voice got very indignant.

“Of course I didn’t like him, and I wasn’t going to, even if he had done everything I wanted. He threw you out of your home Sophie, he is lucky there are Listening Charms all over the place there, or I might have vented some frustration on him.” Sophie’s eyes got a little big on hearing that.

“Please tell me you didn’t threaten him.” Harry and Warrick looked at each other.

“Well I did take out my wand at one point, but I swear it was just to see his and your mother’s reactions to it, this was right after I formed my squib theory. I even told him that I wasn’t threatening him after he accused me of it.” He took a deep breath.

“Do you want to see the pensieve memory of it? I had no intention of keeping this from you Sophie, I just figured we would next see each other tomorrow, and I would take you aside and tell you then, I promise.” She chewed on this offer for a moment, as a lot of the tension in the room dissolved. The others thought that if Sophie was going to slug her boyfriend, she would have done it by now.

“I think I’ll pass on that for the time being Harry. Don’t worry, I’m not mad at you, I understand why you wanted to go there.”

“Why I wasn’t worried about that at all Sophie.” Harry’s facial expression and tone of voice did not match that statement mind you, and he would have wiped his brow had Sophie not still been holding his hands in hers.

“Oh shut up.” She lightly kissed him, and then went over to Warrick and kissed him on the cheek.

“Hey, he didn’t even want to go, why does he get a kiss.” Warrick just smiled at him.

“Shut up Harry.”

“And I was going to spring for a nice restaurant tonight, but no, its fast food for you, traitor.” They all laughed as Harry explained his bribe. Ultimately they decided to order pizza and stay in, since they were traveling tomorrow. There was no electricity at the island, and Harry didn’t have a television in his trunk, so they just watched sports all night, as the Pacers were playing, and everyone was mocking Warrick for being the runt in the family, and how Uncle Antonio was twice the athlete that he would ever be.

“Hey, I’m only 16 you know.” They rolled their eyes.

“And just how tall was Antonio then?” Warrick threw up his hands.

“Oh for crying out loud.” That was when he got hit with all the couch cushions, just a typical night with the gang.

Saturday, December 21, 1996

Noon

Forrester House, Indianapolis

The gang gathered in Warrick's room and they prepared for their 'trip'. Everyone had stashed clothes and other beach supplies in the trunk the night before, and Winky had just gone to the island to place the trunk. Fred and George were due to join them either that evening or the next day, since WWW was not open on Sundays, and there was just enough business from the on holiday Hogwarts kids to need more than just Lee Jordan there on a Saturday afternoon. All the teenagers were wearing t-shirts and shorts, and were having a difficult time with doing so in the middle of winter in Indiana.

"Are you serious with this floo address Harry? It's even stranger than the one for this trunk."

"Fred is the one to blame this time, I wasn't there remember?" Winky fired the floo and came back.

"All is set now Harry and friends. I put the trunk in the middle of the room for now." Everyone motioned for Harry to go first, so he got in the fireplace, threw the floo powder in, and yelled out:

"Mr. Toad's Wild Ride!"

Don't ask.

He vanished, and then reappeared in a trunk just like his, except that it had no furniture or decorations. He waited a minute as the others came through one by one, ending with Warrick.

The Forrester, Steele, and Aylesworth parents, out of necessity, had been told about the island and their method of getting there. Harry had not wanted to do any of this, but Warrick had convinced him that as mature as Harry often acted, the lot of them were still teenagers, and had to let people know where to find them, just in case. Harry had grudgingly agreed, and Dobby and Winky were instructed to come if any of the parents called for them, in case someone needed to be gotten for an emergency. The parents, who had been told at the big dinner on Thursday night, were all aghast at how easily Harry had been able to travel between Michigan and London. The kids assured them that the rest of them had only done the journey once, to see the

shop, and had not gone outside at any point during the visit. The adults calmed down quickly though, as all the teenagers promised them that they were not about to screw up so sweet a deal by being reckless with it.

Harry went up the ladder first, and popped open the trunk lid, climbing out. He saw what was a very basic muggle built cabin. There were two doors on the south side of the room, those must be the bedrooms that Winky had told him about. There was no kitchen area, and just some rudimentary furniture in the main area. The others had come out of the trunk by now, and were taking the room in.

“Well I guess we will be roughing it, until we get some furniture in here.” Harry checked his watch. The shop closed in less than an hour back in Britain.

“Dobby!” The little fellow popped in, and immediately started looking around. He had never been here, Winky doing all the cabin stuff.

“Yes Harry?”

“Please go back to the shop and get a twin or two, and as much money as you need to, and get some furniture for this place. Figure on at least three couches, ten mattresses, some easy chairs, stuff like that. It can be wizard made or muggle made, I don’t care. And make sure you get something the right size for you and Winky too.”

“Yes Harry, I will be back in a little while.” He popped back down to the trunk. The women were all eager to go outside, and Claudia walked over and opened the door. Two things hit them immediately:

The heat was one of them, it must have been at least 80 degrees outside. That isn’t that hot for most people, but it was snowing in Indianapolis at this point, so everything is relative here.

The other thing easily noticed was the spectacular view. The door of the cabin, and there was only the one, looked right out on to the ocean that was about 100 meters away. Only a few trees blocked the sight of the surf, and the beach was nice and wide. The six of them

walked outside and soaked in the fresh air and the view. Sophie couldn't stop looking around.

"Wow, your godfather sure did know how to pick the spots didn't he?"

"Yes he did didn't he? I'm sorry he had to leave it." He was already looking for the large bird of the type that Sirius had used to send him letters. All Harry knew about the island is that Sirius had purchased it a few months before his Azakaban tenure, it had not been an inheritance from the Blacks, though he had of course used their money. At least that's what Harry had gleaned from Fortrap, who had queried about it a few days after the trial. Fortrap had done some digging, and was positive that no other Blacks had known about it, as the island was Unplottable, and Gringotts had held the only portkeys for it.

"Let's go down to the beach." They strolled down to the beach and immediately decided that bare feet should be the order of the day. The shucked off their socks and shoes, and wiggled their toes in the sand, inhaling the tropical air as they listened to the sound of the surf.

Harry was thinking to himself: 'It's the middle of winter, and I'm here on my own private island paradise that only 10 humans on earth have a clue about. Please Merlin, do not wake me up anytime soon.'

The others were thinking much the same thing, and Sophie and Reiko could not help but see how romantic this all could be, and were each plotting about how often they could drag their boys here during the school year. With his trunk and food and things, Harry had more or less adopted a 'mine is yours' policy toward the other five, and Fred and George as well. Soon enough though, the idle daydreaming ended, and the six of them trooped back to the trunk to get their swimwear and beach towels.

They put these to good use and were soon laying out on the beach, Dr. Peppers in hand as they felt very, very lazy. A couple of hours passed by, and then they heard some noises behind them: It was

Fred, George, Alicia, and Angelina, followed by Dobby and Winky. Fred took a look at the six teenagers and the beautiful vista:

“Well Toto, we are definitely not in Kansas anymore.”

“How the bloody hell do you know about The Wizard of Oz?” The twins looked at Harry like the answer should have been obvious, as they spread out their own towels. George explained.

“Dad of course. One of his roommates at school was muggleborn and Dad watched it at his house during some such vacation, I’m not too clear on it. Anyway, he used it as a bedtime story for years, even Percy liked it.” Harry himself had never seen complete The Wizard of Oz, though a video of it was in the Cortez Lounge and he had walked in on it halfway through a few weeks before. He knew the basic story though and could easily imagine Arthur going for it.

“Lee not coming?”

“No, he’s romancing some muggle girl and they have a date tonight.” This was news to Harry, who saw Lee at least once a week.

“A muggle? I’m guessing she doesn’t know about our little world within a world?” Fred grimaced.

“Not according to Lee she doesn’t, they’ve only been going out for about a month or so. I don’t know how serious it is, as we have not been introduced to her. He’ll have a hell of a time showing her where he works though.” He mimicked Lee.

“Trust me dear, there really is a pub there, even if you can’t see it. No, don’t worry, this stick will tap these bricks and the door will open.” The group got a loud laugh out of that image.

“Did you guys get the furniture and everything?”

“Yeah, we’re all set up in there. A discount furniture place opened up just around the corner from The Leaky Cauldron a couple of

months ago, we raided it and got some great deals. I think it cost you about 500 galleons, and we pitched in a like amount.” Harry opened his mouth to protest, but George wouldn’t hear it.

“Hey, we’re going to get just as much use out of this paradise as you are mate, it is only fair that we kick some cash in to get it going. Thanks in part to you and your fine schoolmates here.....and your Howler brilliance, the business happens to be pretty flush with cash at present. You figured out a name for it yet? For the island?”

“What else could I call it but Isla de Marauder.....Marauder Island.” The ten of them smiled. Fred and George each had a large towel set down, and their girlfriends joined them on them. Angelina and Alicia were introduced to the Americans, who they had heard all about, but obviously never met.

“Say Angelina, didn’t you have a game today?”

“Nah, we’re shut down until February. You should sneak back and see a game or something, I’ll figure out a way to keep you hidden from your many fans.” Angelina was a first year Chaser for the Wimbourne Wasps, Ludo Bagman’s old team, something that Fred and George had given her much grief over in the time since they drafted her, as Bagman still owed them some money.

“Don’t tempt me Angelina, but it’s probably better if I keep a low profile for the time being.” Alicia snickered at the thought.

“Just so you know Harry, mum will definitely be the word on how you, and we got here. No nosy git Headmasters will find out, we promise.”

“I thought you loved him?”

“Not since he let Snape attack you back in July. You should hear how they talk about him at The Prophet, my goodness. How times have changed.” Harry was almost afraid to ask this next question, but ultimately could not resist.

“How do they talk about me?” Alicia made a slight grimace, but nothing major.

“Oh most of the staff don’t blame you for checking out, and the Snape story sold a ton of papers thanks to you and Winky. Thanks for that by the way, it did a lot for me there.” Alicia had just moved from trainee to regular reporter, though she had not covered the Malfoy trial in any way.

“No problem, always glad to help out a former teammate.”

They talked for awhile of Gryffindor’s chances against Slytherin, which had stomped Hufflepuff in their opening match. The four of them had been at the Gryffindor game and agreed that Ron had never looked better in goal, but needed a hell of a lot of improvement if he was going to make a career of Quidditch. Ginny had looked better than average, but Cho had still gotten the Snitch over her rather easily. Sloper and Kirke had not gone out for Beater this year, and the twins and their girlfriends could not even agree on who their replacements were, let alone if they were any good or not. Katie Bell had scored 18 goals by herself, and was heading up the draft list with every one of them. Harry learned that Oliver Wood, their old captain, was now starting at Keeper for Puddlemere United. Rumor had it that he was a serious candidate for the Scottish National Team, as their incumbent starting Keeper was only a reserve for the Chudley Cannons. Angelina herself had been called up by the English National Team, and was due to play with them during a friendly against Norway in January. Alicia had not so much as been on a broom since the Ravenclaw game, she had long had moderately severe back problems, and did not miss Quidditch at all as a participant, though she never missed Angelina’s games.

Talk like that continued throughout the afternoon as the two groups, with little more than Harry in common, got comfortable with each other. At night they had dinner in the cabin, as the Brits had indeed stocked the place up well. The two bedrooms were pretty much covered in double and single mattresses, with only aisles providing any space. The living room likewise had two recliners, three large

couches, and three loveseats. The stuff was not luxury oriented, but it was not cheap looking furniture to say the least.

“How the bloody hell did you lot get this outside the store? Let alone shrunk without witnesses?”

“Oh it was easy. We simply told them that we had a big rental truck coming by, and for them to stack the stuff in the back on their loading dock. They were so happy to make that kind of a sale, they would have done anything we wanted them to. Once the handlers went back inside, we shrunk the stuff and put them in our bags. The whole trip took less than an hour.”

“Bloody amazing, is this where you got the stuff for my trunk?”

“Nah, that was another place that Anthony Hook had told us about, in Knockturn Alley. The place we went today was muggle.”

After dinner, Harry and Sophie stole away and explored the island. They walked slowly and said little. There seemed to be no residual anger from Sophie about the Springfield trip, much to Harry's inner relief, and what little talking they did was about the island itself. They did the requisite snogging on the beach, which both enjoyed immensely. They listened to the surf as they lay there, not knowing or caring about what the others were doing. Afterwards, Harry was musing about how life had changed from a year ago, or even six months ago. Harry talked to her about Sirius, something he rarely did to anyone, as it was usually just too painful for him to do so. But tonight was different, this was Sirius' haven after all, a place Harry now felt his godfather never should have left. He told her all his Sirius stories, and though Sophie had seen the man in Harry's pensieve, she now finally started to understand him as she listened to Harry talk about him.

“How different do you think your life would have been if he had raised you?”

“So different I cannot possibly imagine it.”

“I’m sure it would have been a lot better.”

“Anything that would have gotten me away from the Dursleys would have been better. I will never forgive the old man for putting me there, never.”

“You’ve had five months of relative peace though, maybe you’ve found your place.”

“It does agree with me, I have to admit.” They laid there for another hour, listening to the waves and holding each other. There was peace in Harry’s life, and he was now more determined than ever to hold on to it, however he had to do it.

End Chapter

Author's Note: Fleur makes her first, and probably not last, appearance in the story, and I have decided that life is just too short to try and write a French accent into all her dialogue, however much she may have. Let's just pretend that her six months or so in Britain smoothed her accent over some. In screw-up news, in one chapter I say that Professor Murray has no children, then two chapters later I give her a daughter, whoops. Let the official record say that she has the daughter, one that might fit into the overall plot at some point, one never knows.

Saturday, December 21, 1996

Isla de Marauder

Harry and Sophie returned the cabin a little before midnight, and found everyone still up swapping stories, except for Warrick and Reiko, who had gone on their own walk somewhere. The Americans and Brits were getting along great, as Claudia was now telling them some Joe Clancy stories. Jonas interrupted her:

“So Harry, I never heard about his reaction to Dobby moving his furniture around.”

“Oh he was livid, and he never suspected us either, or at least didn't admit to suspecting us.”

“He didn't go to Heyman?”

“Not this time, since nothing was damaged. Lattimore looked around in there and told Clancy to take his medicine like a man, and the idiot actually took the advice.” Ed Lattimore was one of the Senior students in Cortez, and more or less the student leader in the House, though everything was unofficial of course. He was Captain of the Quodpot team, and he and the gang got along quite well. Sophie had been there for the mini-altercation.

“It's about time someone put Clancy in his place.....though I think Harry did most of the work, Clancy hasn't said boo to us since he threatened him.” All four pair of Brit eyes focused on Harry as Jonas

recounted what Harry had told Clancy. Angelina actually went over to feel his forehead.

“Our Harry? The quiet little boy from Quidditch? Not ‘The Boy Who Lived!’” Harry just smirked at her.

“Yes Angelina, your Harry told Joseph Clancy not to screw around with us, and it does seem to have worked. I put up with Draco Malfoy for five years, I am not going to suffer his replacement if I can help it.” Fred and George had sent Draco half his allotment of Howlers, so they knew from where he spoke.

“It’s a brave new world isn’t it?”

“You bet your red haired ass George.”

“One day I’m going to torture that info out of you, how you can tell us apart.”

“I told Ginny last year, all she has to do is promise me her first born child, and I’ll give up the secret.” The room exploded with laughter.

“You don’t want Ron’s?” Harry looked sick at that question.

“The love child of Ron and Hermione? Oh my goodness.” The next hour was spent picking over Ron and Hermione’s relationship, and what they all thought about it, and their future. The consensus was that it would last, but only because no one else would put up with them. Alicia and Angelina did not particularly care for Hermione especially, though it was easier now, since they rarely saw her. In response to some teasing from Harry, both couples said that marriage was not immediately in the offing, but to ask them again next Christmas.

The ten of them went to sleep a little while later, the non-Harry Brits had had an especially long day. Harry and Sophie shared one of the mattresses, their first time spending the night together, though none of the four couples were interested in having sex with this kind of audience, Harry and Sophie having not had sex period. Dobby and

Winky woke them all the next day with the smell of pancakes and sausage, having used both Harry's trunk and the Weasley's trunk's kitchen to make that much food. Fred and George had to take off after brunch, as they had a lot to do at the shop, getting ready for the last few days of Christmas shopping. Harry walked out with them, and the three of them discussed a private matter for a few minutes. Angelina and Alicia stayed through dinner, not having any particular plans. They told the Americans a lot of Fred and George stories, and Harry, Jonas, and Warrick were shooed out of the beach area for awhile, so that the other five could enjoy some girl talk. They did some daylight exploration of the island, and collected some coconuts to bring back to the States.

The gang themselves also left after dinner, the three sets of parents not wanting them gone too long. Harry and Warrick went back to his house, and Harry was now closer in color to his friend than he had been before, much to Warrick's amusement. Warrick's parents got a full tour of the trunk that night before bed, and Harry demonstrated the trunk floo for them. They were still a little wary of it all, but accepted the guys' promises that they were very careful about it all. The Forresters had grown fond of Harry in the short time they had known him, and decided to go along with it all.

Likewise the Professors Aylesworth and Michael Steele, in consultation with the Forresters, decided to wait until a screw-up happened before they put any of their collective feet down. Michael judged it best not to discuss this with his wife, she had not been at the dinner, one never knew how she would take things. Karl Aylesworth in particular was intrigued by the idea of the trunks, and how Harry and the twins had deployed them. Floo travel was possible between the four schools and wizard homes, but it was strongly discouraged unless a serious emergency arose, and was never used at holiday times. The Kindred/Wizard v. Lycan war had not gone beyond the skirmish level, but it was possible that things could escalate any day now. Karl was more than a little tempted to invest in one of those trunks himself. It was the wizard equivalent of a muggle bomb shelter, and could prove quite useful, with little risk other than a drain on the bank account. He didn't say any of this to his wife Lisa though, he was still chewing on it for the time being.

Monday, December 23, 1996

Forrester House, Indianapolis

2:00 pm

Harry and Warrick got in the taxi that would be their ride to the mall, for some last minute Christmas shopping. Jonas was at work with his father, and the girls had specifically not been invited, since most of the shopping had to do with them. Warrick always did his shopping like this, saying that the pressure made him more creative. He had mainly goofed around at the mall in Milwaukee, and had only bought a couple of things for his parents, he still had the girls and one other to buy for. The Forrester family was so large that presents were done Secret Santa style, except for spouses and children. Harry, being a houseguest, was included too, and he had to buy, ironically, for Uncle Antonio, the only one in the family wealthier than he was. This was the one person he hadn't bought for yet, along with something else for Sophie.....and one other person.

"I thought you were all set with that plane ticket thing for Ron?"

"I was, and I've changed my mind. I don't want to spend that much money on someone who will just resent me for it later. Luna's and Neville's last letters both told me that he's been taking potshots at me again, and I'm tired of it." Hermione had failed to mention this, and Ginny wrote that she avoided Ron if at all possible, just seeing him at Quidditch and rogue DA practices.

"Yeah, I don't blame you really. It's sad to see how friends grow apart like that."

"It is what it is, but I agree it's sad. In a lot of ways Ron was under as much pressure as I was, he just didn't have the stuff inside to cope with it." This was as close as Harry would come to calling Ron a dimwit in front of Warrick, who was for all intents and purposes, Ron's replacement. Likewise Warrick was very careful not to rip Ron, who he had of course never met. This unofficial rule did not apply to Harry and Sophie, who had dissected Ron up and down through use of the

pensive. It was something they did when they were bored and not in the mood for snogging.....which admittedly was not that often, but still.

“What about Hermione? Are you still going to give one to her?”

“I’m still chewing on that one. I might do it on the sly, since it would look a little strange for me to spend more on her than the others combined. Ron would be the only one who would care, but he would make a deal of it I think.”

They got to the mall in short order, paid the taxi driver, and started wandering around. Warrick was rarely ever home, and he had only been in there a few times, so he was no help of where to go. They saw a nice jewelry store right near their entrance, and looked at each other, eyebrows raised.

“Save it until the end mate?”

“Yeah, we both know we’re coming back for it.”

They went into an art store, and spent awhile looking at various prints. Warrick’s Secret Santa person was his Aunt Marie, the baby sister of his dad, and he wanted to get her a print of something, having liked the one Harry had bought Sophie in August. Harry saw a fascinating one hanging on the wall, and turned to his friend.

“You think Antonio would appreciate this one?” Warrick looked at him like he was on drugs.

“Not really, no.”

It was a poster print of Michael Jordan dunking on someone from the Pacers, though it wasn’t Antonio thank goodness. Even though the face was somewhat obscured, it was definitely a white fellow.

“Imagine having that print in a store in Indianapolis, sheesh, no civic pride I tell you.” They poked around some more, and Warrick found a Jackson Pollock print that he thought his aunt would like. Harry got a

couple of items as well, for decorating the trunk, though he reluctantly passed on the Jordan print. He had lagged on decorating the trunk for so long that Sophie was threatening to do it for him, and while he liked her taste on the whole.....well one gets the idea. The aquarium was the first step, though he did not yet have any fish in it.

They window shopped for another hour, with Warrick getting Claudia a computer game that dealt with historical battles, and Sophie one of those Hot Wheels racetracks. Now it was Harry's turn to stare at him.

"Eh?"

"You're getting her the serious stuff, I'm getting her something fun."

"A toy racetrack!"

"She'll love it, I promise you."

"You mean that you and I will love it when we borrow it."

"That too, but trust me, she'll go for it."

"Oh sure, what 16 year old girl would not just die for a toy like that?" Harry actually thought it was an interesting idea, and was only ragging on Warrick to amuse himself. They left the store with the racetrack and a deck of Uno cards that Harry bought for Dobby and Winky, since Dobby was now the unofficial poker champion of Cortez House, and might want a new challenge. He also found his Ron present, a board game called Stratego. It had elements of chess in it, and Harry thought Ron might go for it. He also planned to throw in some muggle candy in the package, along with the calendar that he had gotten for each of them.

"What do you buy for a millionaire? I mean this is getting frustrating."

"Now you know how we feel."

“So I should buy him a CD then? I’m easy to please.” It was true, Christmas and his birthdays had been such a present free time for him growing up that practically anything was good enough for him. Except for Hagrid’s rock cakes. That likely wouldn’t be a problem this year, as the half-giant had been shunning him since his breach with Dumbledore. Harry was saddened a little by it, but didn’t blame Hagrid for his choice, the old man had been a much better father figure for him than he had been for Harry.

“Yes you are thank goodness, no one would ever guess you were worth that much money. Get him an audio book or something like that, I know he’s into thrillers and books like that..” There was a thought, it was a little unusual, but pro athletes did have a lot of time on their hands, and lots of plane rides. Harry thought it was worth a shot, so they went in the bookstore and got him an audio book of the latest John Grisham novel, and snagged a different one for himself, just for the hell of it.

Now there were only the girlfriends to buy for, and while Harry had already gotten Sophie some clothes a couple of weeks earlier, he wanted to do something else, something he actually picked out himself. They went back to that first jewelry store, the one by the entrance they had come in. Warrick checked his watch, his mom would be coming to pick them up in 25 minutes.

“Now I got her a necklace for her birthday, I guess a bracelet or something for this one.”

“Where did you get that necklace?”

“Out of a catalog that my mom sent me.” Harry looked around the smallish shop and pondered.

“How bout a nice engagement ring?” Harry was rather surprised when Warrick barely flinched at that salvo, which had been meant purely as a joke. Warrick was only 16, and Reiko barely 17.

“Not this year, maybe next year, if things keep on chugging.” Warrick and Reiko were so often seen teasing each other that it was not readily apparent that they had deep feelings for one another.

“Well you pick first, since I can’t get the same thing for Sophie that you get for Reiko.”

“How about you get the engagement ring?”

“I don’t move quite that fast there Warrick. Sophie is amazing, but we’ve only been together four and half months.”

“You sure didn’t spend much time browsing, that’s for sure.” Harry knew this, not that he cared.

“That doesn’t make me wrong. Since I met Sophie I’ve only found one other girl at Great Lakes that holds a candle to her, even remotely.” Warrick’s eyebrows shot way up, this was going to be good.

“Oh really? Who might she be?”

“The one you’re shopping for jethro.” Warrick started laughing, greatly amused. He wasn’t any more jealous of this than Harry would be if he had said the same about Sophie.

“Too bad for you then, she’s all mine. Claudia’s free though.”

“No thanks, I prefer her as a friend only.” And he did, Claudia just had too many hang-ups for him to think of her in that way, even if he didn’t have Sophie.

“I know what you mean. Anyway, what should I get her? Earrings maybe? She has a lot of holes to fill.” Indeed she did, as Reiko had four on each ear, and was constantly mixing and matching.

“I don’t know, that seems like a personal choice thing, unless you’re getting her diamond earrings or something like that.”

“Yeah, you’re right. You had it before, I’ll get her a bracelet, you get Sophie a necklace.” Harry nodded in agreement. The clock was still ticking, and Warrick, on impulse as always, picked the second one he looked at. It was silver, with a couple of beads hanging off it, and didn’t look like any of the bracelets that Reiko ever wore. Harry decided against the necklace option, Sophie already wore one that he thought looked great on her. He decided on a watch instead, and picked out a nice one, though not one that was incredibly expensive, as Sophie had ordered him not to spend too much on her. Harry’s interpretation of ‘too much’ might be a bit different from hers, but no matter. They made their purchases with a few minutes to spare, and were in the parking lot when Warrick’s mother pulled in, on her way home from work. Everyone was now purchased for, and there was no need to experience the madness of a day before Christmas shopping trip.

Tuesday, December 24, 1996

Forrester House, Indianapolis

Noon

Harry, Warrick, and Jonas were watching a college football bowl game on the TV, their fourth in the last two days, and Harry was finally getting the hang of the rules. He still didn’t like it as much as soccer, but it was a nice diversion considering he was in a country with very little soccer on television. The Dursleys, strangely enough, had actually encouraged him over the years to watch soccer, thinking it would make him more ‘normal’. It hadn’t worked, but Harry still liked his Crystal Palace squad, and had managed to keep track of their progress over the years. Warrick’s parents were both working, his mother at City Hall and his dad on a day trip to gather some materials for his wand cores. The three of them were debating on what to make for lunch when the floo fired, and Sophie came tumbling out, followed soon by Reiko and Claudia. Sophie, after getting the soot off herself, had a dumbfounded look on her face, and seemed to have been crying. She walked up to the boys and pulled an envelope out of her pocket. It was a Christmas card.

“They forwarded this from school this morning, it came there yesterday.” Harry’s heart leaped a little....well, a lot. He knew where this must have come from, and he was quickly praying that at least three names were on it. Harry got up and took the envelope from her, removing the card, which was a standard Hallmark Christmas card, with a note taped inside. Warrick got up to join him and looked over his friend’s shoulder.

Dearest Sophie,

I know this is long overdue, and I can’t apologize enough for that. I miss you honey, I’ve missed you for the last four years, but I haven’t had the courage to write you until now. Your friends’ visit was the kick in the pants I needed I guess. I’m sure they told you about your father and his revelation, and I hope it explained him at least. For myself, I have no such excuse, other than wanting to follow my husband, and I know that’s not good enough anymore, if it ever was.

I will continue to work on him Sophie, along with your brothers, who were so much more faithful to you than I was. I don’t know if they have phones at that school you go to, or the different one you apparently are staying at during the holidays, but if you can, please call, I would love to hear the sound of your voice, as would Jason and Ned. I will make this right Sophie, if you will give me a chance, and a little more time.

I liked your Harry and your friend Warrick by the way, they clearly care about you very much. I’ll talk to you soon honey.

Love,

Mom

The card was signed by her and the brothers, and Harry and Warrick both were getting a little misty eyed. They both went over and hugged her.

“Thank you guys, thank you.”

“Yeah, we neglected to mention that Harry gave her a card with the school’s mail drop on it.” Sophie’s happy sobs got a little louder.

“That’s right, she wouldn’t have known about Ned and Jason, that’s how I thought she got the address, since they know it.” The three of them pulled apart.

“No, we didn’t, as Jason put it, ‘give them up’ to your parents. We pretended that they weren’t in contact with you.” Sophie sat down, still taking it all in. Reiko patted both of the guys on the head.

“Okay, I was mad at first about what you guys did, but it paid off, and I’m mature enough to admit that.” Claudia was nodding.

“Same here, you two did well.” Warrick walked over and grabbed the cordless phone from its spot.

“No time like the present Sophie, do you still remember the number?”

“I do, but.....” Claudia stepped right into the breach.

“No, he’s right Sophie, you don’t want to think about it too much, just do it. Otherwise you’ll be on pins and needles until you do it.” That was true. Sophie’s father was a lawyer, and was the type to work on Christmas Eve, though he did not make a habit of staying late at the office, or so Sophie remembered.

“Okay, give me the phone.” Warrick handed it over, but then Sophie changed her mind a little.

“No, put it on speaker, I want you all to hear it. It will save me the trouble of telling you all about it.” That was good thinking, and Warrick brought the rest of the phone console over. He hit the speaker button, and Sophie dialed the number. It rang four times, and then a voice answered, a female voice.

“Hello?” It was Wendy Weir.

“Mom?”

“Sophie, is that you?” Harry and Warrick gave each other a look that clearly communicated the sarcastic remark: ‘how many other teenage girls call you Mom?’ Sophie didn’t see this though.

“It’s me Mom, I got your letter today.”

“I’m glad they have phones there at your friend’s parents’ school. How are you honey?”

“Oh I’m not there Mom, I’m at Warrick’s house in Indianapolis. It’s a muggle house with phones and everything.”

“Hang on honey, let me get Ned and Jason and I’ll put you on speaker.” She was away for about 20, agonizing for Sophie, seconds, and then came back with the brothers.

“Hi Sophie.”

“Hey there sis.”

“Hi guys, it’s so good to hear all your voices.”

“You too little sister, you doing ok?”

“I’m fine Jason, everything is great now.” Everyone knew what she meant by that, and they were all smiling.

“That’s one ballsy boyfriend you have, I thought he was going to deck Dad.” This was said by Jason with some amusement in his voice. Sophie looked at Harry, who held up his hands as if to say ‘not me’.

“Harry said that he didn’t threaten Dad.” Ned took over, he had noticed the same thing.

“Oh he didn’t, but when Dad went into his thing about not letting you back, this look came over your guy’s face for a half second, I would have taken a step back if I hadn’t been sitting down.”

“Don’t listen to them honey, your Harry was perfectly civil, even to your father. How is school? Ned and Jason say that you’re right up there at the top of your class?”

“Third Mom, my roommate Reiko is first, and another friend of mine is second.” This was Drew.

“You’re doing so well, you always did very well in school. What about college? Are you planning on that?”

“I am Mom, I take the SAT’s in March. They have scholarships available for people like me to go to muggle university, the government pays for it.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know, right now I’m thinking somewhere in the Southeast, with no snow.....I’m getting kind of tired of it.” All smiles now, and the three on the other end could be heard chuckling as well.

“And your Harry? Is he college bound too.”

“No Mom, I don’t think so, not exactly. He’s got money, so he’ll either play Quidditch professionally or maybe be an Auror....that’s kind of a combination of police, Army, and the FBI for us. He’s smart though, he’s sixth in our class.” She privately thought that he would go right into WWW in point of fact, but the business was too complicated for a telephone call, or so she decided on the fly.

“It was interesting to meet him, and your friend Warrick too.” Jason put in now.

“Sis, I hope you don’t mind, but I let Mom look at your letters to me over the years.” Sophie started crying again, as Harry grabbed her hands and held them.

“You kept them?”

“Of course I did, they were my link to you. They were very well hidden, Ned’s were too. If Dad ever went looking, he never found them.” There was some mumbling on their end of the line between Wendy and Jason, which everyone at Warrick’s took to mean that there had indeed been some fruitless searching. Sophie wrote Jason only when he was at school, and had sent Ned his letters in care of Jason while the younger man was still living at home.

“It took me most of yesterday honey, while your father was at work, but I read them all. It sounds like you overcame your father’s and my idiocy and have done very well. I’m sorry we weren’t there to share it with you.”

“It’s okay Mom, you’re here now, that’s what matters.” They chatted for a couple of minutes about Wendy’s work, she was a high school teacher at the local parochial school.

“Hold on a second honey, there’s a call coming in on the other line.” The Weir’s apparently had call waiting, which Warrick whispered a quick explanation of to Harry, as the Dursleys had not had anything like it. Not that Harry was ever allowed use the phone mind you, but some things are just picked up by osmosis.

“Okay Mom.” The other end was silent for about 45 seconds, then they came back.

“That was your father, he’s just leaving the office now, he’ll be home in about five minutes. Sophie dear, you magical people have fast ways of traveling don’t you?”

“We can use the floo, yes. That’s how Harry and Warrick got there last week.”

“That’s right, I didn’t see them get into a car. Your father is off from work tomorrow and the next day, but he has a series of meetings Friday morning. Would it be possible for you to come by that morning? The boys and I would love to see you.” Sophie’s eyes lit up.

“That would be wonderful.....but what if someone saw? Wouldn’t they tell Dad?” Wendy’s answer came right away.

“Let them, I don’t need his permission to see my daughter.” As much as she appreciated this sentiment, Sophie went quiet for a few seconds, thinking about something.

“Well I don’t want you to get any static Mom, why don’t we meet in Champaign? That’s only about 80 miles from you, and I can floo in there just as easily. No one will know us there, and we don’t have to be constantly looking our shoulders.” Champaign-Urbana was the home of the University of Illinois, of which Ned Weir was a freshman student. He now spoke up.

“That’s a good idea little sis, there’s a nice café we can have lunch at, and I can show you around campus. Maybe I can convince you to join me there in a couple of years.”

“You can try. Mom, Jason? How does that sound?”

“Works for me Sophie, I agree with you about not provoking Dad just yet.”

“It’s a good idea sweetheart, say 9:00 am? Ned, you forgot something in your dorm room, and we have to go get it, right?”

“Right Mom, a computer disk that I need.” That was pretty fast, and Harry was fairly impressed by the smoothness of it.

“9:00 am works for me, I’ll find out where the nearest floo point is before then.”

“Meet us at the McDonalds across from the west end of campus Sophie, and we can go from there. I don’t suppose you have the internet over there? It would help with directions.” She looked at Warrick, who shook his head in the negative, the Forresters not owning a computer. The only time Sophie had ever used the internet was at Jonas’ house.

“No, but I’ll find it, don’t worry. I can’t wait to see you all.”

“We can’t either honey. Ah, your father is just pulling into the driveway now, he must have hit all the lights. We’ll see you at 9:00 am at that restaurant, I love you Sophie.”

“Love you baby sis.”

“Love you Sophie.”

“I love you guys too, see you on Friday.” She click the button to disconnect, the conversation had barely lasted five minutes, but Harry had never seen her look so drained. She was smiling though.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, it’s just a lot to take in right now.” She was comfortable though, she had her friends surrounding her, supporting her. Inside, she knew that the call would have been much different without them. She thought back to the night she had been kicked out of the house, when she and Headmaster Rydell had returned to school. Reiko and Warrick had been there for her, talking to her, comforting the hurt. Reiko’s family had taken her in, treated her like one of their own, as had Warrick’s, and Jonas’ too when they became friends. Claudia had taken the place of her brothers, acting as the older sibling. And now there was Harry, who had taken the forever vacant spot he now occupied.

“Come here.” Harry brought Sophie into a hug, and she cried a little more, until there were no more tears remaining. After a couple of minutes, they broke apart, and the three ladies went to the bathroom

so that Sophie could wash her face, and of course so that they could talk about what had happened. Jonas turned to Harry.

“Harry, that was some gamble you made, doing that visit.....how is it that you’re not better at poker?”

“Why gamble with money, when you can gamble with peoples’ lives?” That was a line from Primal Fear, which they had watched the night before the Christmas Dance, the week before.

“Thank you Richard Gere.”

“I’m kidding of course, I only gamble with my own life thank you very much. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and I’m glad it worked out for everyone. My goodness, could I have just sounded any more like a politician?” Warrick was all in agreement with that.

“It was pretty chilling if you want to know the truth.” Jonas cleared his throat.

“So how many of the three of us are going to follow them on Friday?” Harry and Warrick just stared at Jonas.

“And why would we want to do that?”

“Warrick, you don’t think that conversion was a little too easy? I mean, the woman disowns her for four and a half years, and then because you two show up on her front doorstep, she all of the sudden misses her daughter?” Harry was still staring, open mouthed.

“You know, I thought I was the suspicious one around here.”

“You’re rubbing off on me.”

“You really think this could be a scam? For what?”

“I read an article in the Chicago Sun-Times the other day about these camps where parents send their gay, or perhaps gay, kids to,

to be straightened out.” He hesitated, hoping one of the others would pick the ball up from there.

“And that has to do with this.....oh wait a minute, now I see where you’re going with this. Come on man, maybe Harry and I were just the impetus the woman needed to break from Mr. Wonderful’s power.”

“That’s so wonderfully Star Wars of you Warrick, and while I agree that your theory is likely going to be correct, I’m not totally convinced.” Reiko had silently walked up behind them during all this, though Sophie and Claudia were still nowhere to be seen.

“You guys really are conspiracy theorists aren’t you?” The three guys jolted in their seats.

“Would you mind not sneaking up on people there dearest?”

“Yes I would mind, and I figured on you paranoid freaks talking about something like this, which is why I came out first, just in case you bunch are as dumb as you look.” For someone who was deliberately not shouting, her words rang quite loudly.

“It’s so nice to be predictable.”

“Look, I agree that there is a slight chance on Mother Weir trying to pull something, but its very slight. Besides, we just agreed that I’ll be going along on the visit, and I will have my wand in my pocket, just in case.” Harry now felt better about the whole thing, as Jonas’ theory was beginning to grow on him.

“We? Whose idea was it?”

“Mine of course Jonas, and she readily agreed. I’ve been her best friend for over five years, she’s going to need someone there for her on the day. If this one goes well, you can go on the next one Harry, as the boyfriend. I’ll give you all a full report after it’s done, so make sure your pensieve is handy there Harry. But until then, not a word

about this crap to Sophie, let's not feed into any fears that she might be having." Harry himself turned to Jonas.

"Reiko is on the case, I'm no longer worried." The other two guys laughed.

"Neither am I then."

"My girl will make sure nothing goes awry." Claudia and Sophie came out a minute later, and the topic was closed for the most part, as the six kids hung out for the rest of the day and night. Even Claudia and Jonas, perhaps due to the Christmas spirit, perhaps not, were back as close as ever. Of course it might have had something to do with Jonas telling all of them that Jane Aubrey and her conversational abilities would no longer be on his arm.....or any other part of him.

Wednesday, December 25, 1996

Christmas Day

5:45 am EDT

Dobby climbed silently out of the trunk, sometimes he avoided the 'pop' just to do something differently, and he had discovered that he liked climbing things. He looked at the clock on the wall for confirmation, and walked over and shook the sleeping form of Warrick.

Only to have nothing happen at first, so he shook him harder, though he resisted temptation to pinch his nostrils shut.

"Warrick, it is time for you to wake up. You have to wake up now." Warrick mumbled something in his sleep, and Dobby just shook his head, not understanding the words. He was more used to Harry, who while the lad talked in his sleep, did so more along the lines of monologues. He climbed up to the top bunk and started to shake Harry, who was a somewhat lighter sleeper than his friend was. He

rubbed his eyes and leaned up on his elbow. He had only been asleep for about six hours.

“For the love of Merlin, is it time already?” This was said in ‘Yawnese’, but Dobby got the gist of it.

“Yes Harry, you must wake up Warrick now, he will not stir.” Even in his sleepy state, Harry was tempted to have the little guy just jump on Warrick, but that might not be too well received, and Warrick could probably throw Dobby pretty far. He rolled over and somehow managed to land feet first on the floor. He motioned to Dobby:

“You shake his feet.” Harry took the shoulders, and after a few seconds they woke him up.

“I’m up, I’m up, I heard Dobby the first time for crying out loud. Merry Christmas you two.” The greeting was returned to him, and he got out of bed, yawning so wide that Dobby could have put a foot in his mouth and not touch teeth. The little elf decided to forgo that pleasure though.

“You hit the shower first Harry.”

“No, you get this one, I’ll use the one in the trunk. We don’t have much time before the others get here.” That shower had gotten a lot of use during the island getaway, but Winky had cleaned out all the sand, leaves, and other things. Harry went down and up in about ten minutes, lingering for a little bit under the warm blanket of the hot water. When he returned to Warrick’s bedroom, he found his friend tying his shoes.

“I’m ready, let’s get this show on the road.” Both of them still yawning, they made it downstairs just in time to hear the floo firing, and Jonas doing a perfect John Woo roll out of the fireplace.

“One day I’m going to get you to teach me how to do that.”

“Your birthday is only seven short months away. Merry Christmas dudes.”

“Ha ha Jonas, right back at you.”

“The women not here yet?”

“Not yet, we just got downstairs ourselves. You ready to meet some strangers?”

“Sure thing, you’ve built them all up pretty big though.”

“You’ll love Molly and Arthur, and Bill and Charlie, I know that much. The others, well form your own opinions when you meet them.” He had asked them to refer any Ron issues to him. The floo was firing again, and the rest of the gang came out. Everyone was dressed casually, with no robes or anything, and winter coats. Merry Christmases were exchanged, hug and kisses given and received, and presents were being held off until they got back, them not being certain of the welcome they would be getting. The six of them went upstairs and into the trunk, where Dobby and Winky were waiting for final instructions.

“Give us about five minutes, and then go to The Burrow with the boxes of presents, then the food.”

“Yes Harry, five minutes.” The six of them entered the floo, one by one, and said:

“Let’s make it happen cap’n.” The twins’ floo address. Anyone with a special, Anthony Hook made, trunk could floo to another, but they had to have the personalized address, and Hook had advised them to make it as difficult to guess as possible. The emerged into the twins’ trunk, which was still mostly unfurnished and fixed up, as Fred and George still mostly used it for transportation. Harry tried the top door, but it would not move, indicating that the trunk was in someone’s pocket.

Flashback five minutes to The Burrow:

The house was bustling like crazy, as all the Weasleys were in one place for the first time since Percy's funeral. Joining them for the big meal would be Hermione and her parents, as well as Dean, whose family had Christmas dinner later in the day, as did the families of Angelina and Alicia, who had just gotten to the house. Fleur had just come in with Bill, who had had to put in a half day's work at Gringotts, the small concession the goblins made to their human employees. Likewise Arthur had gone into the office for a brief meeting, having just returned. All presents were to be opened during dinner, much to Ron's consternation and Ginny's irritation, in a rare united front for those two. The twins were waiting by the door for Bill and Charlie, having motioned them over to talk quietly.

"What's going on guys?" The twins grinned at their older brothers.

"We're about to have some unexpected guests in a few minutes." The grins meant that it was no one bad, and Charlie figured it out quickly.

"Harry's coming?"

"Right in one, along with his new Marauders. You remember Mum's letter to Harry? The one that got a Howler returned to her?" News had traveled fast in the Weasley grapevine, and Charlie in particular had been teasing his mother about it for weeks in his letters.

"How could we forget that?" The twins could laugh about it now of course.

"At least you didn't have to help deliver the Howler, however funny it wound up being. Anyhow, Mum's letter invited Harry and anyone else he wanted to bring, over for Christmas. The anyone else's and Harry are due in a minute."

"How are they getting here? Portkey?"

"Not exactly. Come with us." Fred led his brothers out the door, while George turned to the rest of them.

“Fred and I hid our presents outside, where certain nosy Hogwarts kids couldn’t find them. We’ll be back in a minute.” He shut the door behind him, muffling insults from Ron and Ginny, and hurried to catch up with the other three. Fred was explaining the trunk system to Bill and Charlie, who could barely believe it, as they hiked to a point out of sight of the house.

“So that’s how you guys have stayed so close to Harry all this time. It wasn’t just Dobby going back and forth, you guys were going back and forth!”

“You know, I don’t think they heard you in Diagon Alley Bill, why don’t you speak up a little?” Bill just looked exasperated at his brothers.

“When were you going to tell us?”

“Well leaving aside that we’re telling you right now, there wasn’t any need to before. Harry insisted that as few people as possible with access to the old man know about it. Now remember, the official word is that they came by portkey.” They got about half a kilometer away from The Burrow, and Fred did a quick scan to see if they had been followed, which they had not.

George took the trunk out of his pocket and enlarged it. He quickly explained the fingerprint feature, and then opened it up.

“Anyone alive in there?” He heard a corresponding shout.

“It’s about bloody time!” Harry soon scrambled up, followed by his friends. Soon the ten of them were standing in the snow.

“You guys need to get some furniture in there if you’re going to make us wait that long.”

“We had to get out of sight of the house you know, people are going to suspect stuff once they see you.”

“Let them suspect all they want.” Harry then proceeded to introduce everyone.

“Bill, Charlie Weasley, meet Warrick Forrester, Reiko Aylesworth, Claudia Cregg, Jonas Steele, and Sophie Weir.” Hands were shook all around, and Bill grinned at Harry.

“So this is the famous Sophie eh? The girl that sold a thousand copies of Witch Weekly.” Sophie blushed furiously, as Harry rejoined.

“But she only got 42 Howlers though, still eating my dust in that very important category.” That earned him a light swat.

“I notice that you didn’t introduce Fred and George here. Just how well do you lot know each other?”

“We’ve been to the States.....what? Five times maybe? They’ve been over to the shop once. Harry comes over once a week usually.”

“But I’ve never left the shop.” Not that he especially wanted to either, but that was beside the point wasn’t it. Bill certainly didn’t seem to think so.

“Who else knows about this thing?” Harry thought for a moment.

“Well aside from the guy who sold it to us, and Peter Tyson, whose idea it was.....Angelina and Alicia, and my Headmistress suspects something, though she hasn’t yet made an issue of it. Oh yeah, Dobby and Winky know about it of course.” Bill just shook his head, but he was impressed by the whole thing. George cleared his throat, getting everyone’s attention.

“Fred and I got up early this morning and swept the house for anything out of the ordinary, and all we found was a Listening Charm on Ron’s room. I guess Ginny had it placed somehow, I know we didn’t do it.” Bill coughed.

“I did that for her this summer. Ron was being a git about Dean and she wanted to know how much to warn Dean about it.”

“Figures, anyway, the rest of The Burrow is clean, and we checked everywhere. We also ‘overheard’ that the old man is planning to spend the entire day at Hogwarts, so the odds of you running into him are low.” Fred was now openly shivering, as none of the Weasley men were wearing coats.

“C’mon, let’s get inside, it’s bloody cold out here.” The group started off toward The Burrow, which was not yet under Fidelius, though that was being talked about more and more by Arthur and Molly. It had been made Unplottable though, and was not considered a prime target for the Death Eaters at the present time, them still wanting to keep Harry overseas if they could. They walked rather quickly, and were almost in sight of the house when Dobby and Winky popped into the kitchen, arms full of a biggish box each. Everyone had gathered in there, as the meal was only minutes away from being served.

“Merry Christmas Weasleys and friends.” Dobby and Winky were wearing matching little Santa outfits, including the hats, and Ginny and Hermione couldn’t help but start giggling. Even Ron and Dean, who got along very well now perversely enough, were smiling. Dobby snapped his fingers, and the two boxes enlarged to normal size, though the aquarium was still shrunken.

“These are presents from Harry, he wishes you all a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays.” Winky was nodding in agreement, though she was somewhat shying away from Hermione, who she did not have pleasant memories of, with the knitted hats and everything. Molly came over and smiled at them.

“Thank you both, we have some things for Harry as well. Let me go get them.” She left the room and soon returned with a wizards bag chock full of wrapped presents. Dobby was fidgeting, trying to figure out how to delay, when the door mercifully opened, and Fred led his group inside.

“Look what we found outside in the snow, the prodigal son has returned.” Harry and the gang came inside, shaking snow off as Bill closed the door behind them.

“Merry Christmas everybody.” Molly and Arthur were nonplussed for a second, but recovered quickly.

“Harry dear, it’s so good to see you! I was hoping you would make it sometime during the holiday.” Molly hugged him and he squeezed back. He had to ask:

“I heard you liked my Howler?”

“You little rascal, I can’t believe you sent me a Howler!” She was laughing though, as they disengaged and he shook hands with Arthur.

“How did you folks get here? That’s a long portkey ride.” That was the official story for how they got here, and Fred and George had been asked to make sure that their girlfriends were told that they had technically never met the Americans.

“Yes it was, and I’m not looking forward to making the ride back on a full stomach. Let me introduce everyone. Brits, meet Warrick Forrester, Sophie Weir, Claudia Cregg, Jonas Steele, and Reiko Aylesworth.” The Americans waved nervously at everyone, and Molly and Arthur shook hands with them as well. Dobby and Winky quietly popped off to get the extra food.

“Gang, this is Arthur and Molly, the tall fellow over there is Ron, next to him is Dean Thomas, with his girlfriend Ginny sitting beside him, on her other side is Fleur Delacour, Bill’s girlfriend.....eyes front Jonas. Next to Ron is Hermione, and over there are my former Quidditch teammates Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson, they somehow put with George and Fred, respectively.” Fred cracked a sarcastic grin, as Angelina and Alicia smiled at the Americans, not giving the game away.

“Yeah, somehow.” Only Molly’s presence stopped food being thrown at him.

“And over here we have two people who I’m betting are Hermione’s parents, they do look vaguely familiar.” The two adults were nodding their heads in agreement that they were who Harry had said they were.

Everyone was staring at the newcomers, and all expressions appeared friendly except for Ron’s and Dean’s. Ron had an enigmatic look on his face, while Dean was not eyeing Harry with any friendliness. Harry filed this away, but barreled on in spite of it.

“Molly, your invitation said I could bring guests, and I wanted all my friends to meet each other.” She had recovered now and waved her wand at the table, expanding to the entire length of the room.

“Well of course you’re all welcome, please sit down.”

“I haven’t left you high and dry with the food though, having six unexpected people show up. Dobby and Winky did a little early morning cooking, they’ll be back in a minute with some provisions.” The gang all sat down together, saving a place for Harry, as Ginny, Hermione, and Fleur all made their way over to say hello.

“Oh you didn’t have to do that Harry, I always make way more than necessary.”

“Then you’ll have just as many leftovers as usual. I know I should have provided some advance warning, but I wanted this to be a surprise.”

“And you did not want to risk Albus finding out?”

“I am getting way too predictable, but you make a good point.”

“Albus will not be coming over Harry dear, don’t worry.”

“I didn’t want to let that old fart stopping me from seeing you guys again.” Just then, Dobby and Winky came back with a couple more boxes, this time filled with foil covered pans.

“Here you go mother of Fred and George, Winky and I have prepared a few things for you all to eat.” The twins overheard this, and cracked up at how Dobby addressed their mother. He was the same way with Warrick’s and Reiko’s parents, addressing them as mother or father of ‘insert name here’. Harry had turned to Arthur, as he took his place next to Sophie.

“So how goes the Muggle Office? Have you met Queen Elizabeth yet?” Arthur smiled, he got asked this all the time.

“Not yet, though that’s in the offing. I deal mostly with the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister, when I talk to the muggles. Interesting chaps they are, though they are flummoxed by the whole idea of us.”

“I can imagine. Our friend Drew’s dad deals with his muggle counterparts every now and again, they’re always shaking their heads it seems.”

“He works in their government?”

“Yeah, he’s the Head Auror in Milwaukee. He’s Travis, if there were three other Travis’s. I’d have had Drew come, but they have a big family thing going on.” They were interrupted by Molly putting the first dishes on the table. Harry’s back was turned, but he could smell both ham and chicken, and he knew at least one turkey was coming. Warrick said what all six of them were thinking:

“This is going to be one nice breakfast, it smells wonderful Mrs. Weasley.”

“Thank you Warrick, we are all so glad to get a chance to meet you five.” Reiko, who was on the end of the gang, sitting next to Fleur, turned and pointed at Harry and Jonas.

“Now you two, remember, pace yourselves. You have two more dinners to eat today, don’t go overboard.” The Brits all looked confused, except for the island crew, so she explained.

“At Warrick’s house for Thanksgiving last month, these two ate enough to feed a small town.” Harry and Jonas looked at each other, and then slapped hands.

“Yeah, that was a good day wasn’t it Jonas.” His friend nodded happily.

“How many plates of stuffing did you have Harry?”

“I think the stuffing ran out after my fifth helping, though I would have had more. How many did you have?”

“Just one, I wasn’t going to fight you for it, I might have lost a finger in the melee. I had four plates of the yams and three of the cranberry sauce though.” As they gleefully reeled these facts off, even Ron was looking impressed, though every female at the table looked a bit nauseated.

“You two were practically comatose for half an hour!”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It was disgusting.”

“Says you Claudia. Harry and I are athletes, we need to keep our strength up.” Claudia threw up her hands as most everyone laughed. Molly just patted Harry on the shoulder as she put more food on the table.. Dobby and Winky had been in an Italian mood that morning, as Harry had told them to make whatever they felt like. So there was lasagna, cannelloni, and both meat and cheese ravioli.

Everyone dug in, as 21 people started conversing almost simultaneously. Everyone seemed to like the Americans, or at least be polite to them, and Sophie and friends were doing their best to

present the best possible impression. This whole thing had been an idea hatched by Harry while on the island. It was like he had told Molly, there was no reason that Dumbledore, or rather the threat of Dumbledore, should deny him seeing his friends and surrogate family. The other five had agreed readily enough, though there had been some debate on whether or not he should just take Sophie. Harry nixed that one after some discussion, he did not want Sophie to be subjected to all of that scrutiny by herself. Harry was on the other end of the gang, seated next to Charlie, and they swapped stories about dragons and America. It turned out that there were dragons in the U.S., their habitat was mostly in the Rocky Mountains.

Sophie and Claudia were talking across the table to Hermione, while Reiko, Fleur, and Bill were engaged in conversation on the other end of the gang. Warrick and Jonas, who faced across from Ron and Dean, weren't talking very much, concentrating on the ham and chicken, and feeling the negative vibe from across the table. Ginny was just listening to everyone, while Hermione's parents, Curtis and Anne, were just trying to take it all in. Anne in particular had her eyes wandering all over The Burrow, though this was not the first time she had been inside. Curtis kept one eye on Ron the entire time, though there was no funny business going on obviously, he just had a hard time trusting any teenage boy these days. He liked the idea of Harry that much better, since he was normally living across an ocean.

Harry was indeed pacing himself as it turned out, and only had three big plates of food.....well of regular food, desserts don't count. Jonas was doing the same, very reluctantly, as Molly's turkey was making him almost drool. After about an hour, Molly stood up.

"Dessert will be after the presents, Ron and Ginny look like they will not wait a minute longer." More solidarity, as both looked a little annoyed/embarrassed at being singled out like that.

"Hey, I could have waited until after dessert!" Hermione poked him hard in the ribs with her elbow, so that was all he got out. Ginny didn't say anything, though a look from Arthur might have quieted her there. He stood up, and led everyone into the now crowded living room.

“So who is first? Harry, since you are the prodigal son, as Fred called you, why don’t you give one out first?” Ron’s worst fears apparently were realized, from the look on his face, which generated another elbow poke. Even Harry looked a little uncomfortable, but he decided to take the ball and run with it.

“Just one for now?” Arthur nodded.

“Dobby, Winky, where are you?”

The elves came from inside the den, they had been exploring The Burrow. They would have a fascinating story to tell the gang about the ghoul in the attic, but that could wait until later.

“Yes Harry?”

“It’s presents time, and you’re first up.” At his signal, Fred and George stood up and walked over. Harry pulled an envelope out of his pocket.

“This is for you.” He handed the envelope over to Dobby, who opened it and found \$200 in there. His eyes goggled more than normal as he pulled the notes out.

“That’s your Christmas bonus from WWW, you two have earned it. Dobby, Winky, I can honestly say that I would not have made it these last five months without you, and I thank you for being my staff.” They both ran over and hugged Harry, and then Fred and George. Dobby was so choked up that he couldn’t even muster a protest.

“Now I am ordering you two to spend that money on yourselves, nothing on me. Oh yeah, your pay is now raised to 65 galleons a month from 50. You’ve earned it.” Dobby beamed, as did Winky. They didn’t argue this, Harry had ‘reconditioned’ them well enough to forestall this. Hermione, though not wearing her S.P.E.W button, had a question.

“And days off? Vacations?” She was smiling though. Fred just shook his head.

“Dobby, how many hours a week would you say you work, for WWW and for Harry?” Dobby contemplated that for a moment.

“It is hard to say twin Fred, perhaps 25 hours a week. 30 at most.”

“Each?” Dobby shook head negatively.

“Combined.” All three WWW owners smiled mockingly at Hermione, and George bowed to her, as she looked rather surprised at how little Dobby and Winky actually toiled. S.P.E.W was clearly irrelevant for Dobby and Winky.

“There you have it Hermione, the laziest house elves in the world.” Everyone at the table laughed, and Hermione surprised them all by bowing back. Harry had one last shot to take.

“ Plus Dobby has his poker winnings, don’t forget that. Right Warrick?”

“I’m never going to be allowed to forget that am I?”

“It’ll be with us for awhile, yeah.” He explained how good Dobby was at poker, and how he never lacked for Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans. Harry wasn’t much better at poker than Warrick, though he suspected that Dobby took a dive every once in awhile when it was just the two of them left in the hand. Harry had not forgotten about the UNO cards, he would give them those at the Forrester’s.

Arthur rose, he was next, as he walked over to the tree.

“Ron, Ginny, I regret to say that your mother and I have confiscated your brooms, and sold them.” Ginny immediately cottoned on to what he meant, but Ron looked like he was about ready to overturn the tree. His father forestalled this by his next words, though he drew it out a little, enjoying the reactions.

“We sold them, and used the proceeds to help us buy you both Nimbus 2004’s.” He reached behind the curtains and drew out the brooms, which were wrapped only with a bow on each. The Nimbus 2004 was just one step below the Firebolt series, and Harry’s own Firebolt was old enough at three years old, that Ron and Ginny could match him in broom power now. They hugged their parents, as Ginny good naturedly groused.

“I can’t believe I didn’t look behind there.” She and Ron couldn’t stop smiling though, Hufflepuff was in big trouble in the next Quidditch game.

“It wouldn’t have worked dear, your father only put them there this morning.”

“You really sold our old brooms? How did you get them?”

“A certain friend of yours purloined them for us Ron, I’m sure you can guess who.” It had been Hermione who had filched them.....no pun intended. Ron and Ginny were beyond happy though, and immediately started talking Quidditch as they went back to their spots, their first real non-rogue DA conversation in over a month.

Presents for the twins, Bill, and Charlie soon followed, all from various siblings. Angelina and Alicia were joining the American members of the gang in sitting out the presents, as they would be doing this with their own families, so the two of them sort of evolved into the organizers of it, remembering who went last and who was due for a present, though Harry had sent presents to their homes, after enjoying their company at the island. Eventually it got back to Harry, who had been evaluating wall space around the living room.

“Okay, for my next one, this is for Arthur and Molly. This present is one I liked so much, I got another just for myself.” He went over to one of his boxes, and extracted a smaller box, which he then blew up to normal size. He and Sophie had wrapped all the presents the night before the dance, though Harry had had to re-wrap some after changing his mind.

“Oh, I got some muggle calendars for everyone here, those are in addition to your main presents. Alicia, Angelina, yours will be waiting for you at home, I wasn’t sure if you would be here today. Here you go Molly, Arthur.” He used his wand to drag the box along the floor. Molly gingerly started to open it.

“It’s not going to explode on us is it? Is this a WWW product?” Harry happened to be standing next to the twins and they all looked at each other significantly, which stopped Molly’s unwrapping.

“That’s a chance you’ll just have to take my dear Molly. Threaten me with a Howler will you.” She backed off hesitantly as her grinning husband was game for a laugh, and took over. He quickly shucked off the paper and found the aquarium. Inside was a gift certificate to a pet store in muggle London, good for an initial supply of fish, and some food for them.

“Thank you Harry dear, this is wonderful. Where did you get it?”

“In muggle Milwaukee on our last school trip, it was the first present I saw for any of you English folk. I saw it and I immediately thought of The Burrow. I only decided to get mine on the way out of the mall. Once you get it up and running, I found a spell in one of my books that will keep the water in motion, you only have to re-cast it about once a week or so.” Arthur was trying to lift it.

“Do you have yours filled up yet?”

“Nope, that’s a project for tomorrow or the day after. There’s a pet store right down the road from Warrick’s house.....that’s where I’m staying for the holiday.” Said for everyone’s benefit, though Molly and Arthur had had a long debate/argument/fight over whether to insist that Harry stay with them over the holidays, Dumbledore be damned. Arthur finally prevailed though, reasoning that Harry didn’t need all the intrigue of a Burrow holiday.

The whole present process took well over an hour, and at the halfway point Molly just gave in and served dessert in the living room, as the present giving slowly but surely evolved into a polite free for all. Harry

got a box of chocolate frogs from Ron, surprise surprise, and a Weasley sweater of course from Molly, he wouldn't not have been totally surprised if Ron had not gotten him anything at all . At about the ten minute mark, just after the twins got matching leather coats from their girlfriends, Reiko stood up, winking at Harry, who had put his sweater on over his other one.

"We have a present for Fred and George now, one that will make them work even harder than they do now." Everyone was intrigued, and turned to look at the Americans. Reiko took a slip of paper out of her pocket and handed it to George.

"I don't know how many of you are aware of this, but my parents live and teach at Tecumseh, another magical school in the States. Claudia, Sophie, and I stay there during the holidays, and during our second Thanksgiving dinner, as you heard earlier, Harry couldn't eat much, so he struck up a conversation with one of the other kids staying there during the holiday. Harry, if you will."

"His name is Steve Atwood, and he's a Fifth Year student there, or as we call it, a Transition student. Steve is an orphan like myself, and despite his scholarship money, has certain materialistic needs. So after I planted the seed in his head over Thanksgiving, Reiko closed the deal this week. He is prepared to be the exclusive WWW representative at Tecumseh, for a five percent commission, and a modest supply of free pranks." Fred and George had huge grins on their faces now, and surprised everyone by gathering Harry and Reiko into a group hug.

"Harry mate, thanks for leaving the country, it's the best thing that could have happened to the shop." Harry winked at Reiko, and she cuffed them both on the back of the head.

"Anything for my partners. We'll work out something for Salem and Pathfinder as well." Indeed, he had an idea for Salem pop into his head at that very moment, but it could wait.

"We'll get you some more catalogs before you go back to the States." The latest WWW catalog had prices for both the British and

American markets listed in it, as with the first batch Harry had had to put up posters with the exchange rates on them. Ginny wandered up and was curious about something.

“Just how hard are you guys working now?” More than a couple of people were interested in the answer to this question, so Fred spoke to the masses.

“Harder than Dobby and Winky, that’s for sure. We probably spend about 25 hours each doing the manufacturing, and probably 20 or so experimenting with new pranks. Lee does most of the stuff upstairs in the shop, since it’s not too busy while the youngsters are at school, so we’re not up there much unless asked for. It’ll only get busier with this new American connection, but I don’t think we’re quite ready to take on any new full-time employees.” Not a few were surprised at how many hours the twins were putting in. Curtis Granger had a follow-up, the twins mixture of humor and business savvy intrigued him:

“How much of your business comes from the States? Are you thinking of opening a shop over there?” George took over.

“We haven’t done the totals for the year yet, but I’d say about 35-40 percent comes from Great Lakes, with the rest coming from Hogwarts, either through the catalog or direct sales at the shop. Harry’s Howler campaign really shot the sales up from there, which of course was the whole idea, right Harry? When Harry went over we figured on some sales, since he had mentioned he would promote us, but we weren’t expecting that level.” He had winked at Harry during the Howler comment, and Harry nodded his head, mock seriously.

“As for a shop, we’re not sure yet. Right now we’re doing so well just from the catalog that we don’t really need a building over there, at least until the youngster here graduates. We’re still checking into it though, after we meet with Jonas’ dad next week we’ll have a better idea of the pros and cons.” Jonas then explained what his father did for a living, as he went over to a couch and chatted about it with the Granger parents and Bill and Fleur.

“So your father works with the Gringotts over there?”

“He works with them Fleur, but he doesn’t work for them. The Wizard currency over there is the same as the muggle one, so he uses a few muggle banks in Chicago for his main money dealing.”

“Did he have to go to muggle university for all that?”

“He did Bill, but only for credibility purposes with the muggles he deals with. He went to The University of Chicago and got his degree in finance. He trained under my grandfather though during the summer, so he took his spot in the family business when he was 22.”

“Are you going to join him?”

“Eventually Mr. Granger, maybe, but not right away. I’ll play professional Quodpot for awhile after I graduate, then I’ll think about muggle university. I’d probably go part-time while I apprentice in the business.” Bill was curious about something.

“How much do professional Quidditch and Quodpot players make over there?”

“Well Quodpot makes more than Quidditch. The Quidditch League is only four teams, and not really that viable an option for most. Our best players come over here, or go to Australia to play it. I’ll likely be the top pick in the draft next year, and I’ll probably make around \$400,000 my first year at least, with more to come. Not as much as Warrick’s uncle to be sure, but the muggles have a lot more people to go to their games, and to sponsor them.” He told them about Uncle Antonio.

“Let’s say Harry decides to play his Quidditch in the U.S., he can figure on \$100,000 as the top pick in the draft, which he certainly would be, and that’s only because he’s so good.” Bill and Fleur were up on the exchange rates, and figured it to be about 1/3 of what Harry could make as the similar pick in Britain.

As their discussion continued, more presents were opened over the course of the next hour, as it stopped being like a game show. Harry got a counterfeit set of Hogwarts Quidditch robes from Ginny, and a complete paperback set of the Dune novels from Hermione, to go with a handwritten list of Bill's favorite tomb raiding charms, and a nice piece of dragon hide from Charlie. Speaking of Hermione, she loved the books Harry had gotten her, but was a wee bit confused over the poster.

"Where on earth did you get this? Why is he wearing a sports kit?"

"That's the point Hermione, its supposed to be funny. I got it in the same store that I got the aquariums, and a few other things. Malls are very convenient, we should have one in Diagon Alley." Hermione grimaced at hearing that, she could not have agreed less.

"It is funny, don't worry, I get it. I'll put it right above my bed, I'm sure Parvati and Lavender will be horrified by it. Was that part of the plan too?" Harry looked at Sophie and shrugged.

"Not really, though that is the theme of my presents to Ginny and Dean. Speaking of which, why is Dean glaring at me like he's been doing?" Hermione looked over at Dean, who was sitting with Ginny over by the tree.

"I'm not sure really." Harry didn't believe this.

"Uh huh, just like you haven't mentioned Ron taking verbal shots at me in in the last few weeks?" She immediately looked guilty, but Ron was looking like he was about to come over, as he had just unwrapped Harry's present.

"We'll talk later Hermione." She turned slightly and gave him a grateful look so Ron wouldn't see it as he got there. He wasn't smiling or frowning, but at least sounded halfway friendly.

"Thanks for the game Harry, and the candy. I'm guessing you've tried all this stuff?"

“I’ve sampled the candy, yeah, but I’ve not played Stratego yet. A couple of the people in my Wizard Chess club told me about it, so I thought you might like it.” This was news to both Ron and Hermione, Harry’s letters had not mentioned this.

“You? In a Wizard Chess Club?”

“Gee thanks Ron. Just because you stomped me all those times, doesn’t mean I don’t like to play, at least against someone I have a chance of winning against. We meet on Wednesday nights, and I usually get a couple games in. I’m not at your level yet, but I’m not half bad anymore. The first game I played back in September, my chessmen were asking where you were.” Ron now smiled at Harry for the first time, but it was brief.

“Anyway, thanks for the stuff.” He took Hermione’s hand and led her away, and she went somewhat willingly. Harry and Sophie just shrugged at each other.

“That went better than I’d have thought actually.”

“I know what you mean, based on what you’ve been saying, I half expected him to try and attack you.”

“Try is all he would have done, I’d have planted him in a wall.” She looked at him, and saw that he wasn’t kidding.

“Good thing you didn’t give him that plane ticket promise then.”

“I’m right on the money every once in awhile.”

“Everyone else seems to be getting along well enough.” And they were. Warrick and the twins were talking, and Claudia and Reiko were chatting with Molly and Arthur. Harry had been half afraid that his friends would just end up talking amongst themselves, but thankfully that was not to be. Still, this was not an experiment he was eager to repeat. The twins were one thing, but there were clearly lines being drawn. He squeezed her hand.

“How awkward is this for you?”

“It’s not that bad really, it’s only for a few hours. It is only a few hours, right?” She sounded hopeful voicing that last one.

“We’ll be at Warrick’s in time for dinner, don’t worry. I miss this place, but there’s too much tension here. The lot of us aren’t coming back anytime soon, maybe if Bill and Fleur get married, but it would have to be something big like that.”

“You’re not at home here anymore? Are you talking about this house or this country?” She was damn perceptive wasn’t she?”

“Choice C, all of the above. Anyway, let’s go get the Dean and Ginny thing over with. Just don’t leave me alone with the two of them.”

“Of course not, I reassure Dean and Ron that you’re not after either of their women.”

“You know, there are definite advantages to dating someone so smart.” They walked over to Ginny and Dean, who had just opened their Harry presents. Harry had gotten them each matching USA National Team soccer uniforms, plus a couple of MLS posters. Harry wasn’t sure if Ginny was actually a soccer fan, but he was trying to be non-threatening with Dean.....who was turning an about face a bit as Harry and Sophie approached.

“This is cool Harry, thanks.”

“You’re welcome Dean, I was hoping you two would go for it. Warrick plays soccer in a summer league and he helped me pick them out.”

“He plays with muggles?”

“Yeah, he’s the only one at school in the league. He tells them he’s staying with his grandparents at their summer place, I guess they believe him.” Dean was curious about something:

“I wouldn’t think there would be many black people up in that part of the country.”

“There aren’t many he says, but there are couple of other African-American fellows in the league with him, though none on the team he plays for. I snuck out one time and watched him play, he’s not half bad for an American. Hey Dean, I have to hit the bathroom, why don’t you come with me. That way Sophie and Ginny can get to know each other a little.” Dean looked a little confused, but just shrugged and got up, a little bit jolted at how quickly Harry had changed the subject.

“Sure, I have to go anyway. Be back in a minute Ginny.” Ginny and Sophie immediately started chatting right away, and as Harry and Dean walked upstairs, the talk seemed concentrated on what the two boyfriends had gotten them.

Once they were out of sight, Ginny changed the subject.

“Is he doing all right over there?” Sophie did her best to be reassuring.

“He’s doing great Ginny, you guys don’t have to worry about him.”

“We do though, though some of us more than others. I’m sure he’s having a comfortable conversation with Dean right about now.”

“I can only imagine, he’s probably trying to defuse the fire a little bit.”

“Dean just needs someone besides Hermione and me to say it: I’m not after Harry, not that I ever really was.” Sophie’s eyes goggled.

“Really?”

“I mean if he had asked me out, I would have said yes. But if I really was in love with him like everyone said, I’d have made the first move. I did with Michael, my first boyfriend, and I sort of did with Dean too.....well I dropped him enough hints anyway, and he took it from there.” Sophie was finding that she liked Ginny, and decided to share some insight.

“I think a lot of him didn’t want to deal with your family if you and he dated, then broke up.

“I don’t doubt it, and it was one reason I didn’t press the matter. Harry had gone so long without a real family, I didn’t want to risk him losing his surrogate one. Besides, I think most people expected him and Hermione to hook up.”

“He thinks they did too.”

“A lot of people at Hogwarts still do, they figure Harry will come back after graduation, sweep Hermione off her feet, with marriage and all that coming after.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, not that many people see Ron and Hermione as being too compatible, and Harry’s escape, if you want to call it that, was done so skillfully that it’s kind of highlighted his intelligence. And if Hermione prizes anything in a guy, it’s intelligence.”

“But everything I’ve heard about Ron.....” She didn’t finish the statement, but Ginny got the gist of it.

“Oh Ron’s no idiot, though he acts that way a lot of times. He’s just lazy that’s all. No, he isn’t as smart as Hermione or even as Harry, but he’s no dummy.” Sophie heard the footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Here they come.”

Flashback a few minutes:

The two boys got upstairs, did their business in turn, and Harry turned to Dean.

“Dean, mate.....can't you see that I'm no threat? I love Ginny, and Hermione for that matter, like sisters, but I wouldn't trade Sophie for either one. Think about it, would I have gone thousands of kilometers across the ocean if I had romantic feelings for either of them?”

“What about that offer you made to them?”

“It still stands, does that mean I have romantic feelings for Ron and Neville too? The offer included them.....it can include you too, if Ginny takes me up on it. The fees for Great Lakes that I'm paying are only 3,000 galleons a year, I could front that for you, no problem. I'm not saying you should do it, I'm not saying you shouldn't. I'm just making it clear to all of you that there is a lifeline available if you want to take it.” This offer was a momentary flash of inspiration, and it seemed to do the trick, though Harry meant it only if Ginny went as well. Dean appeared to come to an understanding with himself, and started nodding.

“Fair enough Harry, I believe you when you say that you don't think of her in 'that' way.” He did not seem too convinced that it went the other way though, and Harry supposed that he couldn't blame him, except for one thing.

“Mate, if she really had those feelings for me, she would have been on the first plane to Milwaukee after I made the offer, Sophie and her parents be damned. It's been almost three months, and she hasn't even mentioned it to me in a letter. She's over me Dean, and we're all better off for it.”

“I see what you mean, I know she rarely talks about it, you know, because it happened right before Percy.”

“How has she been with that?”

“It’s hard for her, especially on his birthday last month, she was almost inconsolable.”

“It’s hard for all of us I imagine, I think about Percy a lot too.” He told Dean about how he had finally come to understand the man. He and Dean had never really talked this personally before, and Harry was relieved that it was going so well.

“So are we cool Dean?”

“We’re cool Harry.” They shook hands, and started back down the stairs.

“How much of your suspicion has been fed by our Ron?” Dean chuckled.

“Not as much as you might think, but he’s not your biggest fan at the moment. He was convinced you swooped in here with thousands of galleons of presents in an effort to buy his family off.....and no, he’s the only one who does not consider you to be part of the family.” Harry gave a light smack to the wall next to him.

“That boy is truly tiresome.” They got downstairs and made a beeline for Ginny and Sophie, who were still chatting away happily. The two seemed to have bonded rather well, which was a pleasant happening under the circumstances. Sophie looked them over for wounds.

“No punches thrown?”

“Everything’s fine thank you very much.”

“Of course it is, two mature boys like yourselves.”

“Funny Ginny, let me go take your presents back.” They all laughed, and Harry now felt comfortable enough to leave the three alone for a few minutes. Neville had written him that Luna and her father would

be spending the day at the Longbottom's, and he wanted to quick see them before he and the gang went back to America.

"I'm going to call over to Neville's, so I can give him and Luna their presents. Be back in a minute." He squeezed Sophie's shoulder, collected the packages, and went over to the floo to fire it up.

"Longbottom Manor!"

In a few seconds, he saw the face of an older woman, who he guessed to be Neville's grandmother.

"Ah yes, Harry Potter, Neville's told me all about you.....but aren't you supposed to be across the pond right now?"

"Supposed to be, yes ma'am, but right now I'm at the Weasleys for a few hours. I'd like to thank you in person for suggesting Peter Tyson, he was invaluable."

"You're welcome Harry, he has a lot of good things to say about you as well."

"Are Neville and Luna about? I want to give them some presents."

"They're in the study right now, why don't you come over and give them their presents in person. I'll go get Neville and Luna."

"Thank you ma'am, I'll do just that." He hopped in the fireplace, and a few seconds later went tumbling out of the floo in Longbottom Manor, in Brighton. He looked around the area around the fireplace, which was in the entry way, the front door being a few feet away.

Neville and Luna came around the corner, smiling greatly, though Luna's wand was not behind her ear, to Harry's disappointment. Of course she couldn't use it during the holiday, but still. No butterbeer cap necklace either, she must have been wanting to make a good impression on Neville's family.

"Merry Christmas you two."

“Merry Christmas Harry.” They led him back into the study, where there was not another Longbottom to be found.

“You look good Harry, America clearly agrees with you.”

“Thanks Luna, it’s good to see you guys.” He handed over the presents, he had gotten Neville a similar selection of candy that he had Ron, and Luna that dress. She opened hers first, and loved it.

“Oh my Harry, this is the prettiest dress. Thank you.” Harry was going into hysterics on the inside, Sophie was going to love this.

“I wish I could take credit for it, but Sophie picked it out for you, I was just the money man.”

“This is some interesting looking candy Harry, is it Wizard American or muggle American?”

“It’s muggle American, but it’s not your real present. It’s this.” He took out a pair of ornate keys, and put them on the coffee table.

“In Sirius’ will I inherited an island in the Caribbean. There’s just a somewhat primitive cabin there, and nothing and no one else. These two keys are both round-trip portkeys for that island. Go whenever you want, just let the twins know ahead of time and they’ll arrange for Dobby or Winky to go there and show you the ropes on everything, and get you set up with food and other things.” Neville and Luna both just sat there for a moment, taking it all in.

“Wow, thank you Harry.”

“Yes Harry, this is very nice of you, thank you.”

“I only ask one thing in return, and I’ll give you two guesses on what it is, but you will only need one.”

“Mum’s the word, don’t worry about that Harry.”

“It’s more than that Neville, I’m talking about not telling Hermione, Ginny, or Ron either. I’m not doing this for any of them, and they can’t know about it.” Eyebrows raised, and Neville blurted out:

“Really? Why wouldn’t you? Not that I’m complaining mind you, this is a wonderful gift.”

“Well you know why with Ron, I just don’t want to do anything this nice for him, the way he’s been lately, and its not much better over there today I don’t mind telling you. The portkeys weren’t exactly cheap for me to get, and I don’t want to spend that kind of cash on him. Besides, its not totally out of the question that he might get pissed about some imagined slight and go blabbing to the old man to get me back. Giving one to Hermione means giving one to Ron. And Ginny, well giving one to Ginny means doing it for Dean, and while he and I just had a nice heart to heart a few minutes ago, I’m still not willing to let him in on that much, and that includes the island. You two are the only ones I trust completely, in couple form, so you’ll be the only ones there who know about the island.” Aside from Remus, he thought belatedly.

“Who else knows about the island away from Hogwarts?”

“Remus and Tonks know about it, but haven’t been there, they were at the will reading when I found out about it. My gang at Great Lakes and I have been there, last week, along with the twins and their girlfriends. I assume Dumbledore knows about its existence, but I’ve already bet my life that he doesn’t know where it is.”

“Well what I said earlier stands, this won’t go beyond Luna and I at Hogwarts, you can count on that.”

“I knew I could Neville. Look, I’d better get back to The Burrow, I brought my American friends over, and I don’t dare leave them there by themselves any longer than necessary. What are you guys doing Sunday? We can meet at the shop if you want, catch up on things better.” Neville looked at Luna, who was nodding happily.

“It’s a plan, say 1:00 pm?”

“How about 4:00 pm instead, I’ll be coming from the States and I’ve already gotten up too early once this week.”

“Portkey?”

“Something like that, I’ll tell you more about it on Sunday. Oh yeah, just for the record, I got you some WWW stuff for Christmas Neville.” The other boy laughed, and nodded his head.

“We’ll be there Sunday, and I have some leftover shop stuff that I can say is from you.” They got up, and Neville led Harry back to the fireplace. Before he left though, Harry had one question:

“Tell me something Neville, you’re an objective observer here: Has Ron always been like this? Did I just not see it for all that time? Or have the last few months been that much of a burden on him?” Neville scratched his head for a moment, and looked a bit pensive.

“That’s not an easy question to answer Harry, since it’s kind of both, and no, I don’t think you saw it. You pegged it at the trial though, you were really loyal to Ron over those five years, too loyal maybe if you want to know the truth. It’s like you thought you wouldn’t have any friends if you split with him and Hermione, when in fact you might have had more. Ron’s always been more like Draco than he would care to admit, he just doesn’t hate muggleborns is all, there is not a whole lot of difference otherwise if you examine it the right way. I know I would like to have been better friends with you before last year, but there was only so much of Ron I was willing to put up with, I’m sure a lot of other people saw it the same way. I mean Hermione is no picnic either if you want the truth, but everyone knows that her heart is in the right place.”

“And the jealousy?”

“Well all three of us know that that’s just been bubbling beneath the surface for years. It erupted a little bit during the Tri-Wizard, but Hermione managed to stamp it down eventually. And now it erupted

again, with you not telling him you were leaving, and seeing how Bill, Fred, and George have taken you in and defended you to the hilt. He probably thinks you're trying to steal his brothers, if not his entire family, and while I know you're not trying to, you can kind of see his view.....again, if you look at it just right. Mrs. Weasley wouldn't have laughed off a Howler from Ron, I know that much." Harry surprised Neville by chuckling.

"No she wouldn't have. I didn't even think about Ron when I sent it, I was just in a mood. Besides, I had the twins and Dobby there to soothe things. I don't know what to do here Neville, Luna, I really don't."

"Don't do anything Harry, let him make the moves. He'll either be conciliatory, or a wanker. If he's the first, then everything is golden. If the second? Well then your arse is covered with everyone else. There's no in between with Ron."

"No there isn't. Thanks Neville, you've given me a lot to think about, and I appreciate it."

"That's not all I've given you, some interesting plant seeds are on their way to you by owl. I wasn't sure if you were going to come back to the UK or not during the holiday, so I sent them to Great Lakes. They're from both of us, and I'm pretty sure you'll find them useful."

"Please tell me they don't need sunlight, I don't have windows in my dorm room."

"I remember you mentioning that in a letter, and no they don't, except for one, and that will grow in any climate. So either put it on your island, or the roof of school with a Disillusionment Charm."

"I can't wait to try them. Thanks in advance. Now I'd better get going." He shook Neville's hand and hugged Luna.

"Merry Christmas, see you Sunday. The Burrow!" He flooed away, and tumbled back out into The Burrow, almost ramming into Hermione, who had apparently been waiting for him.

“How are Neville and Luna?” He swept the soot from his sweater and jeans.

“They’re fine, it was good to see them. Obviously I didn’t stay long enough to get a full brief. So what’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” That was not a terribly convincing answer.

“Why were you waiting by the floo, or is there someone else coming?” Harry had a realization, and went for his wand. Hermione was ready for this, and put both hand on his right arm as he pulled it out.

“No, he’s not coming Harry, at least as far as I know.” Harry’s wand, which was half aimed at the fireplace already, was reluctantly put back in his pocket. Hermione had been unwittingly shielding view of this from the others, so no one noticed.

“Then I repeat, what’s wrong Hermione?”

“Nothing’s wrong Harry, I just hoped we might have a chance to talk.”

“Sure, let me go get Sophie or Reiko.”

“Alone Harry, I would rather us talk alone.” Harry caught his girlfriend’s eye, and she started to walk over.

“I’m sorry Hermione, but that’s not happening, not today. If Ron gets the idea that something’s going on here, he’ll go crazy.”

“I thought you weren’t too concerned about that?” She said this as Sophie came up, linking her fingers with Harry’s. It was a good point, but.....

“Any other day but today and I wouldn’t be. But I won’t risk a scene for Molly’s sake. If Ron comes after me I’ll wind up hurting him, and while he would deserve it, Molly wouldn’t.”

“You’d use magic on him?”

“What other choice would I have? In case you haven’t noticed Hermione, I’m not the biggest fellow around, ten years of half starvation will do that to you. I wouldn’t stand a chance against Ron in a muggle fight, just as I’d butcher him in a magical one.” Hermione had no doubt about that last part, though Ron was no slouch. She had been ready for Harry’s quick draw, but still couldn’t stop it. And that was just the draw, she knew that if Harry threw down on Ron, her boyfriend would be in St. Mungo’s before his hand ever touched his pocket. Indeed, Ron was pointedly looking at the three of them even now.

“Yes, you would.”

“For the last bloody time, what’s wrong Hermione?”

“I told Ron I was reconsidering your Great Lakes offer.” Oh brother, thought both Harry and Sophie. The three of them walked into the kitchen, ostensibly to get some more dessert, but also where they could be alone. No one followed them, though a few people spotted them leaving.

“When was this?”

“A month ago, after we had a fight.” Harry hadn’t heard a Ron v. Hermione fight in months, though he occasionally was nostalgic for them. Now was not one of those times however.

“Yet you haven’t mentioned this to me before now.”

“I stopped reconsidering, and decided not to go.” Harry was becoming mildly irritated at having to drag this out of her, but decided to play her game for the time being.

“What was the fight about?”

“This, the holidays. Well this and Ginny. He said I was spending too much time around her, you know, since they don’t get along anymore.”

“He figured on me showing did he.” Not asked, but stated.

“He assumed it, yes, though he was thinking sometime later on in the holiday break, you caught him by surprise today. I know what you must be thinking Harry, and please don’t. He’s under a lot of strain, what with school, Quidditch, what to do after Hogwarts. The first two are going really for him, ironically. He’s never done better in class, he’s actually buttoning down and studying without me telling him to. And he never played better as Keeper than in the last game.”

“Well he doesn’t have me as an excuse to goof off any longer with studying.”

“Did you two need an excuse?”

“Not really, but let’s notice that my OWL’s were pretty good, and I’m doing quite well now at Great Lakes without him.”

“Yes, and don’t think that that hasn’t occurred to him.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“At least something’s going on up there, its not just spider webs. Anyway, the last one is the problem I’m guessing. What to do after Hogwarts.”

“Yes it is. He knows he’s not good enough yet for professional Quidditch, and the twins told him that he probably wouldn’t be able to work full time at the shop.” Harry raised his hands in protest.

“Now hang on there, I had nothing to do with that. The twins did it, they have full authority in the shop. Besides, I hadn’t even decamped when they had that chat with him.”

“I know that, and even Ron does to a point. But he’s worried Harry, and he sees you succeeding at everything so effortlessly.....yes, I know it isn’t really effortlessly, but that’s how he sees it.” Harry felt a hair stand up on his neck, so he whipped up his hand at the midpoint of the doorway.

“Repulsar.”

There was a gasp, as his pulse spell hit someone in the chest. That someone turned out to be a wheezing, no pun intended, Ginny. She came into the room, slightly doubled over, and it was best that she couldn’t do magic at the moment, or else Sophie would get to see her first Bat Bogey Hex.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“Eavesdropping is not nice Ginny.”

“You’re talking about my git of a brother, I can listen if I want to....without getting a shot to the stomach thank you very much. Besides, it’s my house in case you’ve forgotten.” Hermione was just staring at Harry during the repartee.

“You can fight wandlessly? How did you even know she was there?”

“Just Repulsar for the offensive spells. I can’t do Reducto or Abrumpere yet, all I get is a little light, and no damage, but my shields are getting a lot better wandlessly. Ray says it’s all about focus, and that we’ll get there eventually.”

“Ray?”

“Professor Ray Kinsella, he tells us to call him Ray unless another teacher is present. As for how I knew she was there? I don’t know, I

just sensed it somehow.” Harry had listed all his professors in his first letter, the one sent right after his Sorting, so the others got it after he said the full name. He turned to Sophie.

“Are the others okay out there?”

“Sure, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Hermione’s parents are all looking after them.” Harry proceeded to throw a Silencing Charm at the door, as well as an Alarm Charm.

“Okay, first things first. Hermione, I did not make that offer so that you could throw it in Ron’s face during a fight, or any other time. I don’t blame him as much for being so pissy now.” Hermione immediately had a guilty look come over her face.

“I know, and I felt badly about it then, and I still do. That’s partly why I decided not to come, assuming the offer is still good.”

“Well it is up to a point, but only if done for the right reasons, I figured you of all people would understand that. Ginny, you’re aware that your mother has forbidden it?”

“So she and Dad said, she told me before she sent you that one letter.”

“Are you going to make an issue of it?”

“No I won’t. I was, and still am interested in it, but I won’t be a runaway. I won’t upset Mom that much.”

“Well as she pointed out in her letter, you don’t have a legal leg to stand on if she’s still opposed. Even Murray told me the day I met her that she took me because I wasn’t being pursued by a parent or guardian.” Ginny leaned back and looked at the ceiling.

“It just sounds so calm there, so like what a school should be. You know, someplace where kids are there to learn, and there’s no enemy within or without. No Voldemort, no Malfoy. You’ve built it up pretty

well in your letters, you're quite the salesman, no wonder the twins sing your praises like they do."

"She's right Harry, that's what I was thinking too, when I was tempted. That's why you left isn't it?" Harry was so incredibly tired of having to explain himself on this score, over and over again to the same people.

"I didn't leave Hermione, I escaped. I mean how many more times can I stare death in the face before it grabs me? I'm fast Hermione, but I'm not that fast. They have a game in the muggle world, it's called Russian Roulette. You take a muggle gun, put one bullet in it, and spin the barrel. Then you put it to your head and pull the trigger. You have a one in six shot of blowing your brains out."

"I've heard of Russian Roulette. I don't know if you should call it a game Harry."

"What I'm saying Hermione, is that I've already clicked four barrels, and thank God they've all been empty so far. But the thing is: I was not the one pulling the trigger, Dumbledore was, and I wasn't exactly willing to be in the game. You five can be blasé about the guy to a point, since it's not your lives being risked. For me though? I'll be damaged by what he did for the rest of my life." Harry said this very matter-of-factly, as if it was something he had long just accepted as the cost of doing business.

"It's not like we love him Harry, or even like him anymore. We don't like what Hogwarts has become anymore than you did."

"Yet you're staying. I don't blame you of course, you both have families here that love you."

"So do you Harry, we're your family." Harry sighed mentally, it wasn't the same thing.

"True, but it wasn't enough. I had Dumbledore hanging over my head, and you don't." Ginny had now lost her grasp on the conversation.

“What does this have to do with Ron? I thought that’s what we were talking about?”

“It was, my thoughts kind of got away from me there. I was just saying that I didn’t leave Hogwarts because it’s become a shoddy school, though in fact it has been. I left because my life was in danger there on a daily basis. And look, I’m done with Ron, at least for the time being. I’m tired of his jealous act, and I’m tired of his resenting me for being rich, or being famous. Now I never wanted to be famous, and I mean NEVER. Rich I can handle, except for the small little details of losing my parents and Sirius to get it. Ron seems to forget that, he doesn’t seem to acknowledge that I sacrificed so much. He’s seeing the forest but not the trees.”

“You mean done as in friends too? I know you two aren’t exactly best mates right now, but c’mon.”

“No, we’re still friends, in a way. But no more contact, I’m not going to try anymore. The next letter that goes between us will be generated by him, not me. I have you two, and Neville and Luna, back there at that school to worry about, and that’s it.” Sophie nudged him and mouthed the word ‘Remus’.

“And Remus, I worry about him too. Ron can handle himself from now on as far as I’m concerned.” Just then the Alarm Charm chirped, Dean stuck his head through the doorway, and saw the four of them sitting around the table, which had been shrunk back down to normal size.

“Everything all right in here?” Ginny smiled, and leaned across the table and mussed up Harry’s hair, and then moved over to Dean, wrapping her arm around his waist.

“Everything’s fine Dean, we were just hashing some stuff out.” They left the room, again making the charm chirp. Hermione stared pointedly at Harry.

“Is everything fine Harry?”

“As far as I’m concerned it is Hermione. I care about you all a lot, and you especially will always be my sister.” She reached across and patted his hand.

“You’ll always be my little brother.” The three of them laughed, as the dates did match up, they could have been Irish twins. Harry looked at Sophie and patted his pocket, and she beat him to the punch. She reached into the pocket and pulled out a handwritten slip of paper, and slid it over to Hermione.

“What’s this?”

“Read it Hermione, that’s what happens when someone slips you a piece of paper.” Hermione gave him that long familiar look, and it brought a smile to his face.

“Sophie, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure Hermione, what is it?”

“Please beat the crap out of Harry, I imagine you’re the one person in the world he would let get away with it.” Sophie dissolved into laughter, but spared Harry a whupping just then. Hermione opened the paper, and it read as follows:

This piece of paper entitles Hermione Granger to one round-trip muggle plane ticket, from Heathrow Airport to the destination of her choice. The seat will be in first class, and can be redeemed anytime between December 25, 1996 and December 25, 2026. This coupon is non-transferable, and must be presented to Harry Potter or his heirs in order to be redeemed.

Harry Potter

“Is this for real?” It would sure be a cruel joke, both Harry and Sophie thought, seeds being planted for the future.

“Sure it is, I worked hard at making it sound so formal.”

“It is at that.....thank you, this is very sweet of you. One question though, why the 30 year time limit?”

“Whimsy.” Hermione had not had a whole lot of access to Harry’s escaped sense of humor, but she was rapidly getting used to it, and she was smiling.

“I’m sure I’ll use it before then.” Sophie had a suggestion.

“Pick the most expensive destination to go to, make him cough up big.”

“I’ll make it Australia or New Zealand then, during the busy season. I take it that I’m not to tell Ron about it?” One would think so from the conversation thus far, but Harry was shaking his head.

“That’s your decision Hermione, the present is yours, and you can tell whomever you like about it. Now I personally wouldn’t tell him, but that’s not my call to make, it’s yours.”

“Well I won’t be using it before graduation probably, so there’s plenty of time.....and I’m sure I’ll graduate in the next 30 years.” Left unsaid was the Ron issue, but Harry decided not to press her, she could make her own decisions.

“Oh yeah, I didn’t see before, what did Ron get you?”

“You didn’t see it, because he gave it to me a couple of months ago. I needed new dress robes for the Yule Ball, and he bought them for me. It took a decent amount of his summer money, but it was a sweet gift. I have some pictures of the whole thing at home, I’ll be sure to send you some copies.” So Ron didn’t botch the present after all, Harry thought, interesting.

Another chirp, as the twins came running through the door, followed by Warrick and Jonas.

“C’mon people, it’s snowball fight time. Mom won’t let us get at Quidditch game going, so we have to do this. Let’s go let’s go.” Harry leaped up, a Weasley snowball fight was always one of the highlights of Christmas for him, though he had been promised one at Warrick’s later on in the day.

“I’m game, let’s go.” More people were coming in and getting their coats and gloves on. Angelina and Alicia had flooded home by now, so there were 19 left, though Molly wouldn’t be playing, nor would Curtis and Anne. The three of them still wanted to watch though, and were going outside with the others.

“Come summer, we’re definitely getting a Quidditch game up though.” Harry wasn’t so sure about that, he was wondering if he would even be willing to come back for that long. This was actually only his third visit here, for all the buildup and supposed hominess of the place for him. The first being before second year and the whole Chamber of Secrets fiasco, and the second was last Christmas, when his visions started becoming most horrifying. Still, neither of those times had he ever felt as alien as he did now. It gave him a moment of pause, and only when Sophie and Reiko yanked him outside, did he come out of it. He looked at his watch, they had about two hours to go before dinner started in Indianapolis. He whispered to the two of them.

“After this snowball fight is over, we’re out of here okay?” Sophie and Reiko nodded, they had been waiting for Harry’s cue as to when to leave.

They all trooped outside to an open area where the family had always flown and played Quidditch, and the twins took charge. Fred got everyone’s attention.

“Now by my count we have 16 of us, so that’s eight on eight. The Americans and Harry will join George and I. On the other side will be Bill, Charlie, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Fleur, Dean, and our senior citizen, Dad.” He got a mouthful of snow for that one.

“That’s the spirit Dad. We even divided the magic up equally too, four on our side against five on the other. Now Mum, give us about five minutes to get into places and some snowballs ready, then give us the go.” They split up into their sides, Ron and Dean, neither of whom could use magic, were both loudly speculating on which American could do magic. The twin side disappeared into the trees, as both Fred and George put up a Silencing Charm bubble around them. Harry looked them over, now fully into it.

“So how are we going to cheat?” Fred grinned evilly, and took out a small, shrunk, box from his pocket. He blew it up to proper size: It was a box of spell grenades. He handed them out to everyone, even the non-wanders.

“Just pack the snow around them, and then Harry, George, Reiko and I will load them up. These are a new model we’ve been testing, their set to explode on contact, not on a timer. Fire them at Bill and Charlie first, they’re the most unrelenting when it comes to these things. Trust me, George and I know from bitter experience.”

“Once those two are on the run.....” Harry didn’t finish the statement before at least three people broke in.

“Go after Ron!” Harry had his own evil smile.

“Let the record reflect that those words did not come out of my mouth.” The spell grenades were packed, and Harry and George did a duplicating spell on the regular snowballs, giving them a large supply. Harry walked over to Reiko.

“You remember the second mass duel? When we used the paper?”

“Sure, I guess we’re using snow this time?”

“I’m fresh out of paper.” Reiko was nodding now, she slipped over the edge of the tree line and looked over the opposition. She saw them gathering their own arsenal, and reported back.

“You and I will stand in front and blind them, while the other five nail them with the special snowballs. Once at least two of the wand users are down, then you and I cease the wall and go after Ron.” Fred had come up behind them.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself Reiko, clearly a kindred spirit you are. Leave Dad alone with the snowballs when you start firing though, he deserves a Christmas present.” Everyone was in agreement on that one.

Molly then called out:

“One minute!” Harry looked over at the twins.

“Please tell me we’re going to cheat by jumping the gun.” Fred and George looked at the others, everyone seemed game. The twins were moving the piles of snowballs closer to the treeline.

“Harry, Reiko, you may commence the artillery barrage.”

Harry and Reiko walked out of the woods, wands in their right hands, their left hands outstretched, palms out. They were 35 meters away from their prey.

FLABRA ORUM! FLABRA ORUM!

Aimed directly at the snow in front of the opposing side, who were bunched pretty well together. Bill and Charlie, unbelievably, were the ones on the ends, with Fleur, Arthur, Dean, Ron, and Hermione in the middle of the brothers, in that order. Reiko and Harry had jumped the gun by 30 seconds as the powerful wind spells threw a wash of snow right in the other side’s faces, shocking the living crap out of them, and blinding them to what would be coming next.

Warrick, Jonas, and Sophie stepped out from the woods and started throwing ‘enhanced’ snowballs at Charlie and Bill, while Fred and George were alternately duplicating snowballs, and firing snowballs themselves, also at their older brothers.

This had the effect of causing Bill and Charlie to bunch into the middle.....not that they had much time to do that, as they were each hit by multiple 'enhanced' snowballs that contained, among other things, Petrificus Totalus, Rictusempra, and the Jelly Legs jinx. Both of them went down after a few seconds, and Hermione, Fleur, and Arthur were too busy dodging other salvos to wake them up.....but the problem was, Harry and Reiko had pretty much blinded them, and it was hard to dodge snowballs when you had ¼ of a second's notice of their arrival. The Bill group had not really had a coherent plan at the start, thinking this was all just fun and games, and not imagining that the twins and company would take it so seriously. They barely got off two snowballs each among the eight of them.

After about 30 seconds though, they weren't thinking about much of anything, besides that only Ron and Hermione were left standing.....yes, Arthur had gotten in the way of some loaded snowballs. The wind barrage was halted, and everyone took a few seconds to see who was standing and who was down. Most of the special snowballs had been used, so Hermione was kept occupied by regular ones from the Americans, who weren't whipping them at her very hard or fast. Meanwhile Harry, Fred, and George advanced on Ron, with ill intent in their looks as they closed the distance, stopping every few seconds to grab more snow to throw at him. Ron was being himself, he was giving back as much as he could, that is until he took three right in the face in quick succession. He was a big guy though, and didn't go down immediately, though the aims of all three of his attackers were quite true.

While all of this was going on, Molly, Curtis, and Anne were watching with vast amusement. They saw how everyone was trying to take it easy on Hermione, and were chuckling at the cheating. However, Molly saw Ron being targeted by the three people least likely to take mercy on him, and decided to end this right now before someone got more than hurt feelings. She walked out into the middle of the playing area.

“All right, the game is over now, put down your snowballs.....” She had unfortunately stepped in Ron's line of fire, as the enraged redhead had not been looking too closely, and nailed her in the back of the head. She rounded on her youngest son.

“Ronald Weasley! Look where you are throwing!” Fred, George, and Harry had stopped their assault, wanting no part of even coming close to Molly with a snowball, or any other weapon.

That was not quite the right thing to say to Ron however, who was, correctly, feeling a little bit persecuted, again. He shot back.

“Then get out of my way! Stop shielding them!” Even Hermione, who had picked herself up and was waking up the rest of her team, was appalled.

“Oh shut up Ron, honestly. Can’t you see she was shielding YOU?”

Believe it or not, and no one really could at the time, but Ron shut up. That didn’t mean that he stopped moving though. He picked up another snowball and prepared to throw it right at Harry, but was thwarted by his newly awoken father, who grabbed his arm, stopping the throw.

“Enough Ron, don’t pick a fight you can’t win.” This was said kindly, even though Arthur hadn’t seen Ron take three snowballs in the chops a minute earlier. His son chose not to listen though, and stalked toward Harry and the twins. The Americans were a few strides behind their friends, and decided just to let it play out. Fred and George, knowing what Ron likely intended, pulled out their wands, and sort of aimed them in his direction, while Harry had his loosely in his hand. This slowed Ron down in his marching, but he didn’t quite stop.

“Don’t even think about it little brother. You got pasted, so take it like a man.”

“You cheated! Using magic, and those stupid spell balls!”

“Warfare is mostly cheating Ron, if you want fair play, go watch the muggle Olympics.” Harry turned to George after he said this.

“Actually George, I’m told that they cheat there too, strange potions and things like that..” His partner didn’t miss a beat.

“Well there you have it, fair play doesn’t exist in any kind of battle. So shut your pie hole and walk back to you girlfriend, while you still have one.” Ron was only five meters away by this point, and he seemed to cover the last bit of ground in a hurry as he launched himself at his brother. He managed a half decent American football tackle on him, taking him to the ground.

This was quite a big mistake in retrospect, as that action turned his back to Fred and Harry, who did not take kindly to Ron’s tackling of their twin/partner/mate. They swung their wands over to him as Hermione and Molly screamed at them to stop, afraid of what they might do.

Moblicorpus! Moblicorpus!

This earned mental sighs of relief from everyone else, aside from the Granger parents, as they were petrified that Ron was going to be hexed to London and back. Harry and Fred levitated Ron about 10 feet in the air, upside down. Since that’s all they appeared to be doing, no other wand user looked to interfere, though Arthur and Molly both looked uncomfortable.

“I believe you owe me an apology Ron.”

Ron’s reply can safely be called obscene, and his mother let him hear it.

“If I ever hear you use words like that again Ronald Weasley, every waking moment of next summer for you will be getting to know our gnomes!” There was no laughing by anyone though, all of the onlookers feeling that Ron was getting punished enough without any taunting being involved.

“You’re not coming down until you apologize for your temper little Ronniekins, so just take your medicine, swallow it, and pretend to like it. Harry and I can do this all day if we have to.”

“The truth is Ron, the gang and I have be going soon, so while you wouldn’t be up there all day.....” He trailed off, leaving his intent quite clear.

“All right, all right, I’m sorry for tackling you George! Is that what you want?” The twins and Harry looked at each other. Fred shot back.

“That rather lacked sincerity, oh immature one. Once more, with feeling.” Harry and Fred started a slow twirling of Ron, leading him toward the others as they walked that way.

“I’m sorry!” Ron was starting to panic now.

“Oh fine, I suppose that’s good enough. Fred, Harry, let the little brat down.” After a few seconds more twirling, they move him back to feet toward the ground, then took the spell off. He tumbled into the snow, in a heap. He was physically unhurt though, much to everyone’s relief. He managed to get up after a minute or so, though he was a bit dizzy. He looked around and saw mostly sympathetic faces around him, even Ginny looked more sorry for him than anything. But he easily noted that nobody was yelling at Harry and the twins.....who decided to add insult to insult, as George walked up to him.

“You ever touch me in anger again Ron, and we’ll do more than spin you around a few times.” He walked back in the direction of the house, and Fred followed him, with one last riposte:

“Oh by the way, you’re fired!” The biggest blow of all, as Ron’s summer pocket money would be shrunk more than Fred’s trunk in his pocket. Ginny was the main conduit for WWW sales at Hogwarts anyway, as she distributed the catalogs and answered any questions, the twins using regular owl post for the deliveries and payment. For this service, one not offered to Ron, she was paid 20 galleons a month with no commission. Likewise Fred and George contributed a similar amount towards Dobby’s salary, as Winky still refused to take any money except for art supplies. Ron had not protested the Ginny arrangement, as he hadn’t known about it, having been told she was doing it for some free pranks.

Ron stood there in snow, boiling with humiliation, as Hermione came up to him. She was no longer angry at him, and she gave a dark look to Harry.

“Come along Ron, let’s have some more pumpkin pie.” She took his hand, and he allowed himself to be led off. Harry walked back to his gang, who now fully understood the tensions within the Weasley family. He checked his watch, still set to Indiana time, it was now 9:30 am EST.

“Let’s get going, our time here is over.” Warrick stopped him for a moment.

“Why did he get so mad? Is he such a wuss that he can’t take a few snowballs?”

“He thinks we deliberately went after him.” Jonas stated the obvious for all of them:

“We did, that’s what people do in a snowball fight.”

“And Ron, in his infinite maturity, doesn’t think anyone should ever pick on him or criticize him for anything.” Arthur had come up behind Harry, though not unawares, as Harry had seen his shadow approaching.

“That’s all very true Harry, but he has his good points as well.” Harry didn’t turn around immediately.

“Yet somehow I’m struggling to remember them lately Arthur.”

“Teenagers are always a handful, and they always have rebellious stages.” He spoke from experience, and Harry acknowledged this, and beat his friend to the point.

“Yes, I’m aware that I’m not the easiest person to deal with at times.” Arthur smiled kindly.

“No you aren’t, and neither is Hermione for that matter, or Ginny, or Ron.” Harry was getting a little irritated here, though the Americans were marveling at how calm he was looking.

“It was a snowball fight Arthur, nothing more, nothing less. You got knocked on your butt almost immediately, yet I don’t hear you whining.” The older man shrugged.

“You lot did take it quite seriously.” Harry made a face.

“Oh serious schmere-ious, we were totally having fun. Just because we had a strategy doesn’t mean we weren’t enjoying ourselves.”

“The twins had those spell balls on them I take it? You didn’t send Dobby or Winky to go get them?”

“Dobby and Winky are at Warrick’s house right now, helping get dinner going, and they have been for the last hour.” This was true, however convenient it was for Harry’s side of the story. Arthur surprised all six of them, plus Ginny and Dean who had come up behind them, by chuckling.

“Fred and George, however much we love them, have always had a rivalry with the rest of the family. It’s mostly our fault, since it has been hard to take them seriously over the years, but it does flare up from time to time.” This had not gone unnoticed by Fred and George, and they had talked about it with Harry.

“Perhaps you lot should have believed in them maybe?” Arthur bridled at that.

“No one could have predicted the joke shop’s success Harry, not even the three of you. You funded them on a whim, whilst in a fit of depression. They did not want to take direction from anyone, and saw their joke shop as a way around that.”

“The end justifies the means Arthur. They’re beyond successful, and will only get more so.”

“With you helping them.”

“Why wouldn’t I? They’re two of my best mates, certainly the best mates I have left here in Britain.” Fortunately Hermione was still in the house, though Ginny’s and Dean’s eyebrows did go up a little.

“Would you have done the same for Ron? Given him 1000 galleons to fund a dream of his?”

“In a bloody heartbeat, hell I would do so now if he had a decent idea floating in that oversize head of his.” Arthur looked as though he believed him, but there was one problem.

“He doesn’t think so.” Harry scoffed, and the others saw his temper rising back up.

“He doesn’t think period. He had no problem with me giving them that money then.....oh that’s right, he wasn’t able to tell me what he thought then, because you and Molly wouldn’t let him write me and tell me.” Arthur was getting a little frustrated here too, but didn’t show it.

“That’s uncalled for Harry, no one besides the twins have backed you more with Albus than Molly and I have.” Harry kept his voice calm.....well, calm-ish.

“Only since the horse was stolen Arthur, only since then did you guard the barn. This is turning into a theme when I talk to you older folk over here, I had this same talk with Remus and Tonks. You all say that you fought Dumbledore for me, but you only acted after I did, after I showed you it was possible.”

“You were incredibly loyal to the man as well Harry.”

“I was a screwed up kid Arthur, after 10 years with the Dursleys I was loyal to anyone who was halfway nice to me!” This was the first

time he had ever raised his voice to Arthur or Molly as an individual. His screaming at them on Snape Night was more a group thing. Arthur was, correspondingly, quiet in his reply.

“I know Harry.” It had the proper effect, and Harry had the grace to look ashamed.

“I’m sorry Arthur, I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“It’s okay Harry, just be easy with Ron for the time being. He’s still trying to find himself, and all this that’s going on in our world isn’t helping him.”

“Look Arthur, I’m leaving in a few minutes, and the earliest I’ll be back on this side of the pond will be summer, if even then. This trip over here was not the healing balm it was supposed to be. I’ve tried with him Arthur, I really have over these last few months, but as soon as the portkey finishes I’m going to clear my mind of Ron and his petty jealousies. The next move is his.” Arthur came up to him, and said quietly enough so that Ginny and Dean couldn’t hear.

“I’m asking you Harry, give him one more chance. I won’t beg, because I know you won’t respond to that, and it’s not really in my nature either. But I am asking all the same, don’t abandon my son. If you do it, then Hermione won’t be long after you, and there aren’t many bridges left for him.” Harry was very moved, but not that moved.

“If he reaches his hand out to me in friendship Arthur, I’ll shake it and let bygones be bygones. If he reaches it out in anger, as he did on another son of yours a few minutes ago, I’ll put him in St. Mungos and he won’t be leaving anytime soon.”

“I suppose I have to be satisfied with that.”

“It’s my best offer Arthur, I’m sorry. I won’t attack him first, I can promise you that, but Ron has to be reasonable too, if you expect it from me.” Harry left unsaid his feeling that this situation was getting dangerously close to Dumbledore/Snape territory, where Harry was

always asked to be the conciliatory one, with little or no corresponding effort from the other person.

“I understand Harry, let’s go back to the house now, Molly will be wondering where we all are.” The nine of them trooped back to The Burrow, with Ginny sidling up to Harry briefly, as Arthur had started chatting with Dean.

“I thought what you guys did to him was brilliant, but don’t tell Mum or Dad I said that.” Harry took the opportunity to rub her head, like she had done his.

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

They got back to the house in short order, though for the gang it was only to collect whichever twin had the trunk on him. They did walk in on a surprise though, Hermione was talking intently with the twins, with Bill and Charlie, who had stayed totally out of the fray after the snowball fight, kibitzing. Ron and Molly were nowhere to be seen, and there was no shouting to be heard. Everyone looked up as Arthur led his group back in. Fred addressed them.

“Hermione here has prevailed upon us to reinstate Ron for his summer job, assuming he doesn’t do anything stupidly rash in the meantime. What do you think partner?” Harry looked at Arthur before replying.

“That’s fine with me.”

“ Good, its settled then, on a three to nothing vote. Satisfied Hermione?”

“Yes I am, thank you. You three won’t regret this.” George took a deep breath.

“Hermione, I’ll freely admit that I’ve always had some reservations about you for all these years, with your love of rules and of studying.....two things I find appalling on the whole. But you’re loyal,

I'll grant you that, and for the most part, you're the best thing that ever happened to Ron. I certainly hope he appreciates you."

"I do appreciate her, more than you could ever know." Ron had just walked into the room, followed by his mother. Hermione smiled softly at hearing that, and got up to put her arm around his waist. Ron addressed Harry and the twins.

"I guess I overreacted about the snowballs, it was just a game after all, and your strategy was pretty brilliant now that I've thought about it. For what it's worth, I'm sorry Fred, George, Harry." This sounded very humble and sincere, and the three WWW partners were inclined to take him up on it. The twins walked over and each of them lightly punched him on the arm.

"Accepted, and in case you didn't hear, you can come back to the shop next summer."

"Thanks guys, that's good to hear." Harry walked over next, and silently put out his right hand. Ron didn't hesitate in taking it.

"Be safe over there Harry, I promise that my letters will get longer and better."

"You too Ron, and make sure you nail Hufflepuff and Slytherin in Quidditch."

"We will, Ginny and I will knock them dead with our new brooms, won't we Ginny?" Ginny was looking at Ron like he was almost a stranger.

"We sure will Ron, the Quidditch Cup isn't out of our reach yet."

"Anyway, we should be going, we still have a long day ahead of us." Goodbyes were exchanged, and Harry promised to keep everyone abreast of how he was doing. The Americans were full of praise for Molly's food, and she invited them back for next year. Fred and George put on their coats back on as well.

“We have some shop business to discuss, so we’ll walk out to the portkey area with you.” The Burrow had anti-portkey wards surrounding it, so even if they had been traveling that way, they would have had to walk about 100 meters. Bill and Charlie announced that they were coming as well, having not spent much time with Harry during his visit.

They group hiked back over to the snowball fight area, one that Harry was becoming very familiar with today. Bill walked next to him.

“So are you and Ron fine now?”

“I guess so, but we’ll see how it lasts. It’s easy for him to apologize with your Mum behind him.”

“I was thinking the same thing, but what else was there to do but accept it.”

“There wasn’t, but I didn’t mind. I kind of feel sorry for him on the whole.”

“You got your anger out with that twirling I take it?”

“Well I wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t tackled George, he deserved his impromptu flying.” They reached the open field, and the twins again scanned to make sure that they weren’t followed.

“So are you guys glad you came? At least you got some entertainment.” Sophie answered for all of them.

“We are Bill, it was nice to finally meet a lot of the people we hear about in Harry’s stories.”

“He has a lot to tell, that’s for sure. Hopefully you won’t ever have to meet the Dursleys, or any of our Death Eater friends. Meeting Dumbledore is inevitable, though try not to hex him right away if you ever do.” Hugs were exchanged, as George took the trunk out of his pocket and put it to normal size.

“The catalogs you need are on your desk in the trunk, there’s about 50 or so, which is all we have printed right now. We’ll get that fixed tomorrow and get you more if you need them. Obviously you can tell this Atwood guy that his terms are acceptable, and that the sooner he sells some pranks, the sooner he makes money.”

“Thanks Fred, this is going to be good for us.” The trunk was now ready, and the Americans were already climbing in.

“Merry Christmas mate, we’re glad you came.”

“Merry Christmas guys, I’ll see you Sunday.”

“Sunday?”

“Neville and Luna are coming by the shop at 4 o’clock……sorry, with all that was going on I forgot to tell you.”

“That’s cool, we’ll be sure to let them in. It’ll be fun listening to Luna again, beats the WWN any day.” Harry couldn’t agree more, he was already giggling inside.

“Are you two really fine with Ron now?” Both of them shrugged.

“Not really, but he’s family, and you have to forgive family more easily than you would anyone else.”

“Those were some nice things you said about Hermione.”

“They were true, I’m coming around on that girl, especially now that I don’t see her on a day to day basis. So you have you remember, from this summer.”

“I can admit when I’m wrong, and I was very wrong. Okay, I’m out of here. Take it easy guys.”

“Don’t eat too much at your other stops.”

“Oh I will, that’s one thing you can count on.” With that, Harry hopped back in the trunk, and disappeared. George shrunk the trunk back, and the four of them headed back to The Burrow.

End Chapter.

Author's Note: I said a couple of chapters ago that Uncle Antonio would have no dialogue in the story.....well I've changed my mind. In screw-up news I managed to spell Mobilicorpus twice in the same sentence if you can believe that. It's strange doing the typing on this story. I'm using Microsoft Works, and their spell checker ignores Dumbledore, but doesn't allow Weasley or Quidditch, so when I incorrectly spell an HP word that's usually why, there's already a redline under it and I just don't notice it. Oh, one more thing. I have a group of our players going around the U of Illinois in this chapter, I'm going to be particularly vague about locations, since I've only been there once. It was on a road trip, and I don't really remember much about it, given that it was over 14 years ago. I've used a map of that school, but I'm really just throwing darts in the semi-darkness. Any students or alumni of that school will please forgive me.

December 25, 1996

Christmas Day

Forrester House, Indianapolis

10:00 am EDT

Harry hopped down the ladder in one jump, finding the gang still down there waiting for him.

“Well that's over with anyway.” The others laughed, and Harry was relieved that they at least seemed to have had a good time.

“You guys are all right with having gone there?” Reiko shrugged.

“Hey, you're the one who attracted the controversy, not us. I liked them actually, well not Ron.....then again, he didn't have much to say to any of us.”

“He didn't talk to me at all.” Claudia.

“Me neither.” Jonas.

“He seemed a little standoffish.” Warrick.

“He said hello to me, saying again that he wasn’t the Witch Weekly source, but that was about it.” This was Sophie.

“Well it could have been much worse with Ron, so I’m rather grateful on the whole. He’s a git, apology notwithstanding, but sadly, it seems that I’m stuck with him. So nobody’s mad at me for asking you all to go?” Heads shook all around, and more than one compliment was made on Molly’s cooking, though Jonas had one point to make.

“Do you think that Dobby and Winky could make that cannelloni again soon? I loved it.” Laughs were the rule, and everyone went upstairs to Warrick’s room, and then on to the living room. Presents were scheduled to be done after the main meal, and the tree in the corner was almost half blocked by the mountain of wrapped gifts.

The living room was full of Forresters and other relatives, and everyone gave a ‘Norm’ style hello to the kids. Harry, who had literally met hundreds of new people in the last five months and had a surprisingly easy time remembering most of them, recognized most of the people, and was quickly introduced to those he hadn’t. Nick Forrester, Warrick’s father, wandered in from the kitchen, incongruously eating a popsicle. He approached the kids and took them aside, not wanting anyone else to hear where they had gone.

“So how did it go? The Brits nice to all of you?”

“We had a good time Dad, and I for one am glad we went. It’s good to be home though.”

“You’re not too full? Harry? Jonas? Karen will be disappointed if you don’t repeat your performance of last month.” Harry and Jonas exchanged mock grumpy looks, as Nick’s expression was one of bemusement.

“Why does everyone single us out?”

“Yeah, I mean I only had three plates of food, and one plate of dessert. And believe me, I wanted more.”

“I hear you Harry, eat yourself to near unconsciousness at one meal, and you never hear the end of it.” The women were looking disgusted again, though all were internally jealous beyond all measure at Harry’s metabolism, in particular, though he did work out with the Quidditch team twice a week. He had explained his metabolism to them this way once:

“If you starve, even for a little while, your body decides that food is to be treasured, and it will allow you as much food as you can possibly fit in it, with little or no ill effects. That’s not scientific by any stretch, but it’s my theory, and I’m sticking to it.” And Harry believed this, and perhaps a small part of him, subconsciously maybe, was afraid that all his wealth would be taken away, and he would be left to be hungry again.

That explanation made enough sense that he was only occasionally ragged on by the gang, usually when he demolished an entire pizza by himself. Jonas, on the other hand, was a workout nut, and could be found in the basement workout room at least five or six days a week, as he was right in between Warrick and Harry size wise, being 6’ tall and 175 pounds, as opposed to Harry being 5’7“, 150. So everyone knew how Jonas was able to eat all that and stay fit. Ironically Warrick, the largest of the three boys, ate the least. He was now 6’3” 200, and prided himself on a fit body, without being a workout warrior. He and Harry were certainly an interesting contrast, standing side by side.

“Okay boys, I believe you.....are we taking bets?” Harry and Jonas looked intrigued, and huddled together for a moment, whispering. Jonas was their spokesman.

“Name your terms Nick.”

“You each have to eat five full plates of food, and two each of dessert. A full plate of dessert constituting a regular size piece of whatever pie you like, and a full plate of food meaning that the plate

has to be covered, except for the edges.” This wasn’t as easy at it sounded, though it was less than either had consumed at Thanksgiving, Harry had had five plates just of stuffing alone, and three pieces of pumpkin pie. The Weasley/Dobby/Winky food was now sitting a bit heavier though, as they had not had breakfast on Thanksgiving Day.

“And we get what if we win?”

“You two get to set the menu for Easter dinner, and I mean the whole thing. You can’t make it prohibitively expensive, no caviar or Dom Perignon, but all your whims will otherwise be covered.” This was too good to be true, both Harry and Jonas thought suspiciously.

“And if we lose?”

“You two do the dishes for today, by hand, for everyone. You’d have today and tomorrow to do it though, I’m no martinet, and I know you have Reiko’s thing tonight. And no Dobby and Winky helping either, no magic whatsoever. Do we have terms?” Harry was all for it, but saw Jonas still pondering, and to help give him time:

“Will Karen go along with this? I would think she’d object to two teenage vacuum cleaners controlling her menu for a day like that.”

“We talked about it last night, she’s fine with it, especially since we’ll win.” More huddling and whispering, and Harry had another question.

“Who decides what a full plate is? And how long do we have to do it? We don’t want you calling dinner over after 30 minutes.” Oh that was good, thought Nick, very clever. He knew he liked this kid with the funny accent, who was about half his son’s size, but probably ten times as dangerous, if one believed the press. He believed it all right, but thought that Harry was, on the whole, good for Warrick. He liked their running arguments, and the tales of pranking Joe Clancy back at school. The rearranging of the furniture was an especially nice touch he thought.

“What you ate at Thanksgiving is fine by me, those size portions.....and yes Harry, before you ask, there will be plenty of stuffing. You inhaled so much of it last month that Karen decided that everyone else should have a shot at it too.” The girls were snickering now as Harry went a little red.

“It was really, really great stuffing.” Nick looked wistful for a second.

“Yes, I remember it well, from years past. Karen was very flattered that you liked it so much, no need to wonder if you were faking liking her cooking. Your time limit will be two hours, down an hour from Thanksgiving because of the presents and things. I repeat, do we have terms.” Jonas and Harry simultaneously said:

“We have terms.”

“Good, I look forward to it.” He shook hands on the deal, then walked into the kitchen, presumably to tell his wife that the game was afoot.

“Why oh why did you two agree to that?” Jonas looked at her like any fool should be able to figure it out.

“We couldn’t back down Claudia, our manhood was at stake, right Harry?” Harry waved off that manhood stuff, he was secure enough in his. Sophie was a big help there of course.

“Whatever, I’m already planning the menu for Easter Sunday. Shrimp will be a highlight, and so will chimichangas, chicken of course. We’ll have Dr. Pepper to drink, and German Chocolate cake for dessert. Oh man, I’m getting gooey already.” Sophie just put her hand on the back of his head.....and started shaking it. He put a stop to that right away, and redirected her arms around his waist.

“Easy there darling, I need to digest some more of breakfast, giving me a headache won’t help.”

“I was hoping to shake you into your senses.”

“Too late, we shook on it. Look at the bright side, you get some more entertainment. It’s not a snowball fight or Fred and I tormenting Ron, but it’ll do.” He still thought of that last part as entertainment, as he was pretty well convinced that Molly had forced Ron into apologizing.

“Fair enough, at least we don’t have to do anything for it, and we’ll still get the benefit if you win.”

“Uh huh, right. Jonas and I won’t brook any editorial collaboration WHEN we win. Will we Jonas?”

“Oh no we won’t, I have plans for that day, and they include a nice antipasto. Come on Harry, let’s go out and shoot some hoops, get some exercise, we need to burn some breakfast off.” Harry agreed, and Warrick joined them in the empty driveway, as all of the guests had flooded over. The ladies decided that a little exercise wouldn’t do them any harm either, with two more big meals to go today, so they decided on a walk. Both groups rehashed the morning’s events, and all seemed to agree that, for the most part, it had been a successful experiment, though one that should not be repeated too often. Fred and George had predicted to Harry that wedding bells were imminent between Bill and Fleur, so there would be a Weasley wedding in the summertime to go to.

Harry had not played any basketball before, even during the Thanksgiving Holiday, and the three boys had a fun time having him learn. Warrick had been playing all his life of course, and Jonas had played in a junior league when he was still living at home. There was no place to fly in Indianapolis, a city which had very few Wizards for its size, around 45 or so, so while Harry and company had all brought their brooms, they were only able to fly them at Tecumseh, weather permitting. It wasn’t snow they were worried about, but the wind. Quidditch games in Oklahoma were crazy affairs, with Quodpot, and its need for precision accuracy even worse.

After 90 minutes of HORSE, and general goofing around, the dinner bell, so to speak, was rung. Reiko, Claudia, and Sophie were already

inside as the boys trooped in, and found their places at the table. The group was about 35 total, though it did not include Michael and Barbara Steele, who were visiting her parents for the day. As Jonas couldn't stand most of his mother's side of the family, he was glad to be a regular guest here. Nor were Karl and Lisa Aylesworth in attendance, they were in charge of things at Tecumseh for the day, the Headmaster and his Deputy both being away, visiting family. The table, however, was not magically enlarged, though the room was. Rather, one of Karen's cousins, who was not here, owned a furniture manufacturing plant, and had the table custom designed for her. It had leaves in the middle, and could in theory accommodate 50 people, as it had during Thanksgiving 1995. The teenagers, along with four other children who were not yet Great Lakes eligible, were situated mostly in the middle of the group. It's not that Warrick was the only teenager in his generation in the family, it's just that the others went to different schools, and just didn't happen to be at this particular gathering. He was not especially close to any of them, and had told Harry that they were not viable candidates to market WWW products.

Much to Harry's and Jonas' consternation, Nick announced the bet right before grace was said. All eyes turned to the two boys, they were the only white male faces in the room, so they were easy to spot. Martin, Nick's father, was sitting near Jonas at one end of the table, and gave them the once over.

"That was less than these two ate last time if I recall, what's the catch?" Harry assumed that Nick would have a story ready for these types of questions, and was not disappointed.

"The boys had breakfast over in Harry's neck of the woods. Hopefully the portkey ride back made them just sick enough to lose the bet, not to mention how much they ate over there. Harry has been singing praises on his surrogate Aunt's cooking, I'm betting he and Jonas are pretty full right now." This was an obvious psychological ploy, made all the worse because it was working, though Jonas faked some bravado of his own.

“No such luck Nick, we’ll all be feasting on our chosen menu come Easter.” More than a couple of the family members looked dubious at that prospect, but withheld comment for the time being. Thomas Davis, Karen’s father, said grace, and everyone prepared to dig in.

For plate one, Harry chose Karen’s stuffing of course, and Jonas decided that he might as well get a plate of the stuffing before Harry cut him, and everyone else, off. While outside, they had pretty much decided to pace themselves for the first 90 minutes, then put on a burst at the end to finish off their bet commitments. Both of the guys were seated close enough to Nick and Karen that they could be watched for their progress, though both Harry and Jonas were confident enough that they made no plans to cheat.

Also in attendance was Antonio Davis, Karen’s baby brother, who was not often at these gatherings, due to his basketball schedule for the Indiana Pacers, and before that in college at UTEP, The University of Texas-El Paso. He had arrived just a few minutes before the gang got back inside, he somehow fit in the floo fireplace. The group seemed to make a point not to make too big a deal over him, which suited the soft spoken basketball player just fine. Harry was sitting across from him, and had a few questions for him.

“Just out of curiosity Antonio.....I’m not sure how to say this.....but can a broom hold you?” Harry had never encountered someone his size before, up close and personal, outside of a few sightings on the street in Little Whinging and Milwaukee. The tall man laughed, and the others in earshot smiled as well.

“I haven’t been on one since high school to tell you the truth Harry, but it was no problem then. Once I got to about 6’6” though I made a point of writing the Nike people to find out. Those things can hold sumo wrestlers, or so they tell me.”

“I would pay a few dollars to see that. Imagine an exhibition game between sumo wrestling Wizards, and maybe one of the school teams. All the proceeds to charity of course.....hmmmm.” He was brought out of his scheming by Sophie, who tapped him on the arm, and pointed her fork at his only half eaten plate. She had been

somewhat less than supportive of the bet at the beginning, but now that there was no stopping it, she wanted her boyfriend and friend to win it.

“Yes dear.” Antonio, who was married, chuckled.

“She’s got you well trained already hasn’t she?”

“I’ve learned not to argue too often.” He got an elbow in the ribs for that, but he had said it affectionately.

“He’s learned not to argue at all.” That wasn’t quite true, but he was still saving up chits for the big battles that had not yet occurred. Harry knew he was lucky though, Sophie was not the argumentative type, but could smoothly talk him out of his more harebrained schemes. And smoothly did not just mean womanly charms. Harry had been so accustomed to Hermione running his life, that he had no real problem with Sophie doing the same.

He polished off his first plate of stuffing in short order, though technically speaking, he was not what one could call ‘hungry’ at any point in the meal. He looked over at Jonas, who was over halfway through his second plate, this time of mashed potatoes and gravy. Harry himself grabbed some more stuffing, and a small piece of turkey to go with it. He continued talking with Antonio about basketball, and was so clueless about the sport that the older man didn’t mind talking about his job. Basketball was not the only sport talked about between the two men though.

“So is Warrick going to be going pro with Quidditch? Does he have what it takes?” Warrick was further down the table, and was not listening to their conversation. Harry didn’t have a good answer for him though.

“I honestly couldn’t say Antonio, I’ve never seen a professional Quidditch match, so I don’t know what the caliber of play is.” This caught the tall man by surprise.

“You never saw one in the UK?”

“No, I was kind of under house arrest during the summertime the last few years. Other than the Quidditch World Cup two years ago, your game last week was the only professional game of any sort I’ve seen in person. I know that Warrick would have been a good player at Hogwarts, and probably a starter. He and John make for a good tandem.” As well they should have, having been a Beater tandem for almost six years now, which matched what the twins had done, or would have done if not for a certain Hag Grand Inquisitor.

“House arrest?”

“Yeah, Dumbledore wanted me to be ‘protected’ from any Dark Wizards or Witches out there who might want to have a little fun with Harry torture. So he stuck me with my totally horrible aunt, uncle, and cousin. Not the friendliest people you could ever want to meet, if you get my meaning.” He gave him the highpoints of life in Dursley-land, and the people in earshot no longer had any questions about how much food Harry packed in, or why.

By the time the story was done, he was on his third plate of stuffing, and his last, as he really did want others to get to taste it. He looked around and saw everyone happily chatting away, there were no loners in this family, or at least none were here. Nick always seemed to be eyeing either him or Jonas, and with little pleasure, as his friend was now slowly eating his fourth plate of food, this time it was some roast Karen had made, for those few who did not care for turkey. After a minute of people watching, Sophie, who was on his left, poked him in the side with her elbow.

“Penny for your thoughts?” He smiled, and squeezed her hand with his free one.

“Oh nothing much, just looking around. This is still hard to get used to.” She gave him a curious look.

“All this family stuff?”

“Yeah, this is not a Dursley Christmas, or a Hogwarts one for that matter. Other than last year, those are the only Christmases I’ve ever known.” She knew all this of course, but always found it interesting when Harry mused out loud like this. In a lot of ways, even after five months of dating, Sophie found Harry to be still quite fascinating in his view of the world, based on his experiences.

“This is better though.”

“You better believe it is.” The understatement of the afternoon, though Christmas at Hogwarts always had at least Ron there with him, and usually had Hermione as well.

“So what did you get me?” This was segued pretty smoothly, but not smoothly enough. Harry checked his watch, dinner still have 80 minutes to go, not to mention .

“You’ll find out in a little while.”

“A hint? I’ll give you one about yours.” She didn’t really care about the substance of the present, she just liked making his squirm like this, and she liked forcing him into verbal gymnastics.

“The trouble is, Sophie dearest: I don’t want a hint. I want to be totally surprised when I open the package, assuming it is in fact, a package. I like good surprises.”

“I know, and I don’t really want to know anyway.”

“You mean you acknowledge that I won’t tell you.”

“That too. How’s your stomach? You going to be able to do your bet duty?”

“I’m fine thank you, I’m about to finish my third plate, almost halfway through my bet commitment. Look at Jonas going for it though, he’s about to finish his fourth.”

“You’re way behind honey.”

“My only race is the clock dearest, and Jonas is a lot bigger than I am.” He took a huge bite to make his point, somehow gulping it down. At this point, he was mentally kicking himself for not building in a handicap for himself, maybe four plates of food and a piece and a half of pie. Oh well, that ship had now sailed.

“Competitive to the last. And to think that I always resisted the idea of being with an athlete.”

“I’m not an athlete, I’m a Quidditch player.” Though Harry did not exactly look much like John Kruk, whose famous line he had unknowingly paraphrased. She just smirked, and kissed him on the cheek.....a cheek that was stuffed with food, a strange sensation to be sure.

“Did you ever wind up sending a card to your cousin? I’ve been meaning to ask you about it.”

“No, I decided not to. It’s better just to cut them off completely. Dudley did a turnaround at the end there, but I can’t forgive all those years of abuse.” Indeed he couldn’t, though he did place Dudley one level below Petunia and Vernon, who were one level below Dumbledore and Snape. No need to wonder where Voldemort was on the chart.

“You’re going to leave them alone then? You’re not really going to hurt them?” He had told her of his daydreams about getting some payback, though he had never gone into great detail about it, some thoughts were just for himself. She didn’t like the idea at all though, even after he showed her some pensieve memories. Sophie had the attitude that it was a slippery slope, and was best avoided all together. Harry didn’t necessarily disagree, though both of them knew that he would do what he wanted. He wasn’t quite that whipped.....yet.

“I don’t think so, no. Not unless they somehow do something else to harm me.” Said in a bland tone of voice that could just have easily been used to order a cup of coffee at Starbucks. Harry didn’t see how

they could harm him, Charlie had removed pretty much everything about his recent activities, including the names of those who had helped him. This was not a subject proper for someone who had to pack in a lot of food though, as Harry finished plate three, so he asked her for a change of conversation. Sophie was still working on her first plate, picking at it while she talked with Harry and Reiko, who was on her other side. Sophie and Reiko were both slim, and worked hard to stay that way, they would probably quit after this plate, and one of dessert.

“How are you boys doing down there? On your fifth plate already Jonas?”

“You bet Nick, your only hope is that my small friend here craps out on me.....but that’s not going to happen, right Harry?” The Harry in question gave his friend a semi-annoyed look, and said loudly.

“Well we have established one thing: If I have to puke before this bet is over, I’m not even going to bother trying for the bathroom.”

Nick actually spit out his food as he started laughing uproariously. The rest of the table heard that salvo too, and Harry and Jonas were living up to their billing as the entertainment portion of the meal.

“You didn’t really mean that did you?”

“He’ll make a nice target; don’t worry, I’ll make sure you don’t get any on you.”

“You’re such a gentleman.”

“I have my moments.”

Harry spooned some mashed potatoes and gravy onto his plate for round four, as Jonas, seemingly in a hurry, finished off plate five with a flourish. They were now at the 50 minute mark, with an hour and ten minutes still to go, dessert probably wouldn’t even be served for another 30 minutes.

“Nick, I don’t suppose we can amend the bet to let dessert plates be transferred to regular food plates? Harry’s leaving us all some stuffing, and I don’t want to wait 11 months to get some more.” Nick and Karen were sitting across from each other, and seemed to come to a silent acknowledgement that Jonas was going to hold up his end of the deal so easily, they might as well accommodate him. Karen answered him.

“That’s fine Jonas, grab some stuffing before Harry changes his mind. You’ll only owe one piece of pie after you finish it.” Harry heard this.

“Hey, I was trying to be nice you know, letting other people have a shot at it.” Never mind that Karen had made triple the recipe this time, factoring in 10 more guests and Harry into the equation.

“Yes you have Harry, and for that I’ll let you use the extra-strength dishwashing liquid tonight.”

“Yuck, yuck. Just so we’re clear, if I don’t make it, Jonas has to do dishes too, right?” Jonas turned to Harry, as if realizing something, and theatrically shook a finger at him.

“You’d better not tank on me buddy.” Harry winked at his friend.

“I will do my level best to win our bet.” He was about three bites away from finishing round four, and while his stomach was filling up pretty quickly, he wasn’t unduly worried. Nick answered Harry’s query, enjoying the byplay.

“Yes Harry, the bet means that both of you have to finish the plates, so you both win, or you both lose.”

Harry quickly finished off his mashed potatoes and gravy, and went right for some turkey for his final one. Jonas had polished off his stuffing in record time, and was just sitting back, sipping on his iced tea as he awaited dessert.

“Are you going to be able to eat anything at Tecumseh?” Just the word ‘eat’ made Harry’s stomach do a swan dive. The turkey was doing some damage, though in theory it tasted really good.

“Probably not, this is really starting to become uncomfortable.” Sophie checked her watch.

“You still have an hour to go, plenty of time.”

“Easy for you to say, you don’t have two pieces of pie to eat. Oh God.”

“Well if worse comes to worse, you have enough time to go to the bathroom and do some fiddling.” That was a nice way to say puking, but Harry had a feeling that Nick and Karen would consider that a violation of the rules, and make him either lose the bet, or eat a couple more plates as a penalty. Over the next 15 minutes he picked at his turkey enough to finish it, but he did spend a few minutes with his eyes closed, not looking at the food.

With 40 minutes to go, Karen and her sisters put the desserts on the table. They included pumpkin, apple, and blueberry pies, and a couple of chocolate cakes, with some puddings as well.....Martin Forrester loved pudding. Jonas quickly inhaled a piece of blueberry pie, his favorite, and soon went to work on some bonus pudding, his part in this was now complete.

“Jonas had fulfilled his part of the bet, with six plates of food and a plate of dessert. Congratulations Jonas, I didn’t think you had it in you.” Jonas grinned at him.

“Gee thanks Nick, a left handed compliment if I’ve ever heard one. Now how many plates have you had?” In addition to being 6’5”, Nick carried about 240 pounds on his 41 year old frame. A former college football player, he looked as though he could match Harry and Jonas by himself, but he didn’t try to.

“I had three plates, and I’ll partake of dessert. Good thing you didn’t want me to try and keep up with you, you would have lost. Back in the

day, seven plates would have been a warm-up for me.” Martin, his father, just shook his head, as Nick’s mother gave him a funny stare as well.

“Don’t you boys listen to him, he never could match you Jonas, or even you Harry, not even as big as he is. Not even when he was your age. Now his little brother, however.” He trailed off, getting a little nostalgic. Richard Forrester had passed away seven years earlier in a car accident, while on his way to his wedding. He was the baby brother of four, the other two not being here, and stories were still told at every family gathering, including this one, though by this point they were told as to make others smile, not make them sad. Nick was the third brother, he and Karen had lost a baby of their own, three years after Warrick had been born. That was the reason they had had no other children, not every family was as procreative as the Weasleys, and many pureblood families only had one child.

Speaking of Warrick, he had stopped at two plates, and one piece of pie, and called down to his roommate.

“You all right there Harry? You gonna make it?” Harry gave him, and the room, an exasperated look.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“We need some amusement, Mom won’t let us have the TV on while we eat you know.” Harry had a quick comeback, and a veiled threat.

“I’m going to eat my very American apple pie, and then make the final dash to the finish line. Remember folks, every dig at me will make the Easter menu that much weirder.” Okay, it wasn’t so veiled after all, and those betting on Jonas and Harry, if only in their minds, got a bit quieter, though it was all in fun. Claudia, inquisitive that she was, just had to ask though:

“Like what?”

“Do any of you know what haggis are?” A few did, but for the others Harry gave a long, very detailed, description of the Scottish dish, which Oliver Wood had described to him in a similar manner over four years previous. He couldn’t finish his dinner then, and some were pushing back from the table now, if only a little bit.

“You wouldn’t.” Harry grinned evilly at Nick.

“Oh I would have Dobby or Winky make it specially.” He took a bite of his apple pie for emphasis, as to show how close he was to completion.

“Okay, fair enough. Shut up Warrick.” He gave Claudia a dirty look.

“Hey! Dad has been doing most of the taunting, not me.”

“Sure, but it’s his house, I can’t very well tell him to be quiet at his own table now can I?” Warrick looked at his father, who was nodding smugly.

“Point taken.” Nick wanted no part of haggis though, and quickly struck a deal with Harry, so the taunting ceased anyway.

The next half hour went back to normal, as Harry started on a piece of chocolate cake for his final plate. He ate slowly but surely, and crossed the finish line with no trouble, with 12 minutes to go.

“And my roommate has successfully finished his last plate of food, and the teenagers reign supreme!” Nick walked over and theatrically examined the plate.

“All right, Harry finishes with time to spare. You two are now in control of the Easter menu.” Harry stood up.

“Since you all stopped your mockery just in time, the menu will contain nothing strange, nor will it be hot dogs and hamburgers, or things like that. Right Jonas?”

“Absolutely, think Mexican and Italian for the themes. We’ll provide a written copy of our menu a month in advance, so you can decide whether it suits your taste buds or not.” This was very fair, and everyone thanked the two of them for the entertainment. Everyone started filing into the living room for the presents, as Karen and a few others cleared the table and started loading the dishwasher for the first of its many runs today, which would probably last all night to get that many dishes, pots, and pans done. Harry and Jonas made a point of helping, and the rest of the gang followed suit, ensuring that the process didn’t take too long. After about 15 minutes, everyone was ready for presents.

There was to be no game show, and after the young kids were done, it was more a free for all. The four young kids were not technically in the Secret Santa pool, and thus got the most presents, as was proper. They were the usual complements of toys and video games. Marty Coyle, one of Warrick’s cousins, was only nine months away from starting Great Lakes, and got his first broom as his main present. It was a Nike starter model, perfect for someone his age, and he was just as overjoyed as Ron and Ginny were by their more advanced brooms earlier in the day. Everyone took a lot of pleasure in the happiness of Ozzie, Marty, Keisha, and Elizabeth, and the kids were having the times of their lives.

After they were done, everyone else pitched in. The gang huddled together and did their present exchange. Harry first opened the CD’s.

“Oh man, The Eagles, The Long Run.....this is just what I wanted Warrick, thanks.”

“I had a hunch dude, don’t ask me how I knew it, but I had a hunch. And how did you know I wanted this Mingus Live CD? I mean this is uncanny.”

“I have special insight mate, I just sort of knew it in my mind that that’s what you wanted.”

“You two are like your own little comedy team. We really need to put you out on the road.”

“Yeah, because Harry could use the money, poor guy that he is.”

“It sucks doesn’t it? It brings me back to the halcyon days of 1991 when I thought I had no money at all, and I dreamed of being able to buy just one Mars bar whenever I felt like it.” He told this as a joke, and indeed everyone laughed, but it was the truth nonetheless. Another Dumbledore grievance, allowing him to grow up poor, though perversely in an upper middle class house. He opened the rest of his CD’s, and now his Eagles collection was complete, though he would wind up having to wait a few years for Hell to Freeze Over Again so he could see them in concert.

He opened his Reiko present and found a handwritten gift certificate for three hours of free typing for any paper or project that he wanted. Harry’s typing was still a little uneven, so he really valued something like this, and he thought it was great that she was willing to spend her time for him, rather than her money. He slung his arm around her and gave her half a hug.

“This is cool Reiko, thank you.”

“You’re welcome Harry, I thought you might find it useful.” Indeed he did, and three hours was really nice. This would take care of most of his next Muggle Studies term paper, and he felt it was only fair to warn her.

“Figure on Muggle Studies, I have one due in February.”

“Works for me, it’ll give me something new to learn. You think you’ll write it out by hand, or just sit next to me and dictate?”

“I don’t know, the last one in there I wrote while at the computer. I still have to pick the topic and everything, I’ll let you know the time frame in a couple of weeks.”

“Sounds good, thanks again for Risk and Shogun, these will be a lot of fun.” They were strategy board games, and were as close as Reiko would come to cracking a history book.

Speaking of history books, Claudia had just opened her history book, one that she had especially wanted for some time, and gave Harry a rare hug, as she wasn't big on affectionate displays like that. She had given Harry a set of regular chess pieces, thinking he might be interested in learning the game that way. It was an interesting gift, and Harry was intrigued by the idea of not having to con his pieces into moving where he wanted them to. It seemed that his pieces were always going to be dubious about his abilities, no matter how many times he yelled at them that Ron was not even on the continent and couldn't destroy them at his pleasure. There was only one problem with using the pieces right away: None of the gang knew how to play chess, besides him of course. He would have to wait for Drew to get back from his family's place in Denver, where both sets of grandparents lived.

Sophie had just opened the first of her three packages from Harry, and pulled out a dress.

"No wonder you talked me out of getting this Reiko." She reached over and kissed Harry thank you, liking the dress a great deal.

"It was very tricky there roommate, I almost had to fess up that Harry was buying it for you."

"I kind of suspected it to tell you the truth."

"Sure you did." This went on for a couple of minutes as they argued about it. Others continued to open presents while they did so, though everyone kept half an ear open just in case they said anything interesting. Claudia and Reiko had gone in together to get Jonas a subscription to the muggle Sports Illustrated, so he would not have to fight over copies in the library like he had been doing for six years. Sophie had gotten Warrick a copy of Quidditch Through the Ages, via Dobby, wanting to give him a better sense of the history of his Wizard sport. As Harry had told Antonio earlier, it wasn't out of the question that Warrick could play professionally, even if it was only in the four team American Quidditch League, which was the equivalent of Single A baseball compared to the British League.....well, maybe AA

baseball. Correspondingly, Claudia gotten him a book about the history of the World Cup of soccer, a sport he definitely was not going to pro in, but loved to play anyway, which was the point of most high school sports if one really thinks about it.

While Reiko and Sophie were 'discussing' the dress, Sophie opened up another package, and found another outfit she had had her eye on back in October. She gazed over at Harry.

"You two planned this pretty well." Harry wasn't the least bit sorry about that either.

"She's right Sophie, you know you didn't suspect anything."

"Don't start Harry."

"Yes dear."

"Thank you Harry, they're both lovely." She kissed him heartily, and Harry was physically reminded that he hadn't had any 'playtime' in a couple of days. His stomach was full to the bursting, but it was not quite that full.

"You have one more, don't forget, but don't worry, it's not clothes in that one."

"What did I tell you about spending too much on me?"

"I heard you very clearly when you said it."

"But you ignored it didn't you?"

"Yep." Harry didn't even pretend to deny it.

"What am I going to do with you Harry?" Oh the possibilities for answering that question, as Harry got a sneaky grin on his face. He was about to say something when she clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Don’t say it Harry, you can think it but not say it.” Everyone laughed, as both Harry and Sophie both started blushing. Harry pried her hand off his mouth.

“Sophie, you’re dating a rich guy who likes giving presents to people, get used to it. I know you don’t like me for my money, which is all the more reason to get you nice things whenever I feel like it. You do not have to reciprocate in kind, so know that too.” He hadn’t opened her present yet, he was saving it until last, as she had wanted to open his first. She saved that last one, the small one, for a little while and opened up the Hot Wheels Racetrack that Warrick had gotten her.

“Oh this is cool, thanks Warrick.” Warrick gave Harry a triumphant look, matched by the amazed look Harry gave his girlfriend.

“This is cool? It’s a toy racetrack darling.”

“I know, it’s pure Warrick, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. He’s been giving me presents like this ever since we were 11 years old.” Harry couldn’t help himself and started laughing.

“Fine, fine, I stand corrected Warrick, are you satisfied?”

“Quite satisfied thank you.”

“I mean good grief.” Dobby had come over, and Harry tossed him his other present.

“Where am I delivering this to Harry?”

“To yourself Dobby, a really short trip. It’s for you, I picked it up the other day for you.” Dobby opened up the UNO cards and looked delighted with the gift. He immediately opened up the little pamphlet with the rules and began studying it.

“Thank you very much Harry, we must get a game going, later tonight perhaps after your third feast of the day.” My God, thought

Harry, I'm even getting grief from Dobby of all people....err.....elves. He patted his major-domo on the back and grinned at him.

"You bet Dobby, I'm sure you'll slaughter all of us at this too." Dobby and Winky wandered off, with Dobby already shuffling the deck of cards in his tiny hands as they walked. Harry had a bad feeling about that, thank goodness they only played for candy, or he would wind up working for Dobby instead of the other way around.

"Oh this is lovely Harry, thank you." Sophie had unwrapped the watch, and immediately put it on her left wrist, replacing her old Swatch watch. At the same time, Reiko was putting on her new bracelet, and whispering many things to her boyfriend, with a big smile on her face. The basement here was where Nick did his wandmaking, so Harry had a feeling that he would either be loaning the trunk out tonight, or simply sleeping there himself, if Reiko could get away from her parents. Harry pried his ears away from the whispering.

"I'm glad you like it, it was the last thing I got for you." Claudia and Reiko pulled her arm over and had a look see at the watch.

"That looks really great Harry, you have good taste."

"I don't know Reiko, I suppose I do, I just liked the look of it is all. It's like art isn't it? You either like it or you don't, and sometimes it's hard to explain why." That was his theory, and he was sticking to it, though he liked the idea that he had good taste. He would take Reiko's word for it. He saw Antonio approaching, and quickly opened his Secret Santa present next, and found an Indiana Pacers home jersey and shorts, right in his size too.

"Oh man, this is cool Antonio, thanks."

"You're welcome, thanks for the audio book, how did you know I like John Grisham?" Harry looked at Warrick.

“I didn’t really, your smaller cousin told me you liked thrillers. I got one for myself too, though I haven’t had a chance to listen to it yet.” Antonio hesitated for a second.

“Which one did you get for yourself?”

“The Rainmaker, a cool name I thought.” Harry had gotten The Chamber for Antonio.

“I know how this is going to sound, but would you mind trading? I already have The Chamber, my wife got it for me last year, though I haven’t listened to it yet either.” Harry started laughing, though he was nodding his head while doing so.

“I’m not laughing at you Antonio, I just think its funny. Sure, we can trade, no problem. Dobby!” Dobby had been in the kitchen, and instead of popping, just walked the 15 feet over to Harry.

“Yes Harry?” Harry took the box from Antonio.

“Would you please go get from the trunk my audio book called The Rainmaker? It’s in a box just like this, and put this box where the other one was.” That was a nice set of verbal gymnastics, but Dobby got the drift. He was there and back in about 10 seconds, and the trade was made.

“Thanks for the sports kit mate, I’ll use it when I work out for Quidditch.”

“I heard you had fun learning how to shoot earlier.” It was fun, as incompetent as Harry turned out to be at it.

“I wasn’t terrible at it, but I lost at HORSE pretty badly.” Just then Ozzie Coyle, all of seven years old, came running over and demanded a piggy back ride from his huge uncle. Seconds later he was far in the air, as Antonio brought him back to his parents, threatening at all times to break into a run.

Harry slipped off his Weasley sweater, and put on the jersey part of the outfit, looking very hip hop.....no, not really. The jersey was number 99, and had Potter written on the back of it. He was very pleased that Antonio went to all that trouble, though he figured that the tall man had one of the team gofers take care of it.

He eyed his last present, a small box from Sophie. She was looking at him expectantly, though a little nervously. He opened it up, and found, ironically, a watch. It was a pocket watch though, silver on the outside, with a silver chain, and it did not look brand new. Harry's own wristwatch was a \$30 thing he had found while in London during his hiding out time in July, so he really could appreciate this.

"Thanks Sophie, this is great." She still looked nervous.

"Open it up Harry." He hadn't done that yet, and did so. It turned out that it wasn't a watch at all, it was a watch/locket, and inside was a picture of the two of them at the dance, posing for one of Winky's photos. Then, as Harry stared at it, the picture changed to one of them cuddling on the couch, then to another one of them studying on the couch, and so on. It was a 20 picture slideshow of them as a couple, including a few that Harry hadn't even known were taken, the photos all moving of course, Wizard style. He reached out his hand while closing it up.

Accio Sophie!

The Sophie in question crashed into Harry, and they fell on the floor in a heap, Harry holding her tightly. He whispered in her ear:

"That is the best present you could have gotten me, thank you." Indeed Harry had been more than a little afraid that she would offer herself up as a Christmas present, and while Harry certainly wanted to explore that topic, he would have felt a little uncomfortable to have it offered as a present. As far as presents went, this ranked just a hair behind the photo album he had gotten from Hagrid, but was ahead of all the others.

“I was really hoping you would like it. I know that guys don’t like wearing locket, so I thought this would be a nice alternative.”

“Oh I love it Sophie, please have not one doubt on that score. There is only one decision to make now.” She looked at him curiously.

“What’s that?”

“Am I going to wear it on my right side or left?” She kissed him.

“We’ll do a private fitting later on, and figure it out.”

“Totally private I hope.” Little Harry was turning into Big Bad Harry James just at the thought, and he subtly shifted his position on the floor so that everyone staring at them wouldn’t notice.

“You can count on it Mr. Potter. Now let’s get off the floor before someone says something.” Too late, as the rest of the gang cat-called them quietly to get a room. Quietly, because a couple of the younger kids were within normal earshot. The two of them got to their feet, and Harry showed around his new keepsake, for lack of a better word to call it. The other two ladies knew all about it of course, but this was the first Warrick and Jonas had seen or heard of it.

“Where did you get it?”

“It’s a family heirloom actually. My grandfather gave it to me way back, not the one who turns out to be a Wizard, but my maternal grandfather. He gave it to me when I was eight, and said that I should only give it to a very special man. I didn’t really know what that meant at the time, but I figured it out eventually. The watch part stopped working a couple of years later, I can’t remember if it just stopped, or if I dropped it one time too many. But I’ve had it with me ever since, I made a point of taking it with me when I left for good. I was trying to think of what to get Harry when I hit on this, and a few charms later, the picture pocket watch was born.” Claudia looked right at Harry, who had a thoughtful look on his face, though not for the reason she thought.

“If you sell this kind of thing at WWW, she gets a cut.” They all laughed, and Harry shook his head.

“This is too classy to be a prank product, but if we ever diversify that much, I promise you royalties.” It wasn’t a half bad idea really, but again, not really in the milieu of WWW.

They just all sat there for a little while, relaxing in the atmosphere, until Ozzie came back over and asked if he could play with Sophie’s racetrack, he had been eying it from across the room for a good 10 minutes now. Her face split into a wide grin, as she grabbed the box with one hand, and Ozzie’s hand with her other one, and they went up to Warrick’s room to set it up. Warrick collected the rest of the kids, and they and the gang decided against a snowball fight in lieu of playing race cars, Harry and Jonas were more than a little relieved at that decision, the idea of sudden movement was still not a good one for Harry. Harry collected some drinks for everyone, and the ten of them had a fun hour with the racetrack, before Ozzie and Elizabeth, age five herself, had to go home. Marty and Keisha stuck around for a little while longer, and they were the first to try out Dobby’s new UNO game, as both kids knew how to play already. Keisha and Marty were both ten years old, the daughter and son of two of Karen Davis Forrester’s sisters, and both were due to start at Great Lakes the following year, as they had each shown enough signs of magic that it was widely assumed that their letters were coming in a few months.

Their UNO experience held them in good stead for a full 20 minutes, and then Dobby cracked the game, and things became more even. They had to leave just when he was about to start thrashing them, but a good time was had by all. Marty and Keisha were good kids, but kind of wild, and were quite thick as thieves, more like brother and sister than cousins, though they did live in the same city, Bloomington. After they went back downstairs, Reiko turned to Warrick.

“Next year is going to be nothing but trouble, with those two let loose on our sleepy little campus.”

“We’d better keep them in line too, otherwise Aunt Grace and Aunt Lina will make me sorry. Their little angels couldn’t possibly cause any problems.” He looked at Harry, who had his ‘scheming’ face on.

“What’s going on in that twisted mind of yours?”

“I’m trying to decide who will take over the WWW sales from me. Should I pick one of them, or split it between them?” Talking about Keisha and Marty.

“You only have over a year to decide that Harry. Besides, you know you’ll open a shop over here.”

“I’ll be too busy with Quidditch probably. Nah, both will be too young for that kind of responsibility. I’ll have to groom some Transition or Apprentice kid to take over until Marty and Keisha are old enough.”

“You’re assuming that they would be interested in the first place.” The subject had not come up during race track time.

“Every kid is interested in money Claudia, especially as easy a money as WWW is.”

“Like you? You don’t even take a cut of WWW sales at school.”

“Because I don’t have to, it’s really very little work, and a few hundred dollars a term is hardly going to make or break me. Beside, I owe Fred and George more than I can ever explain, though they’ll pooh pooh it.” And they did, more times than they could count. Fred and George, at Harry’s explicit direction, pumped all his share of the profits back into the business. They used it for rent, to pay Lee a nice wage, and for portkeys to certain places, to get materials. The twins certainly weren’t set for life yet, but they were well on their way to being pranking moguls. Zonko’s hadn’t made any counter-moves yet, but there were rumors floating about a takeover offer.

The six of them decided that it was a good time to go to Tecumseh, dinner there was less than an hour away. Harry went down in the trunk and grabbed the catalogs for Steve Atwood, as well as a ‘starter

kit' for demonstrations and the like. They said their goodbyes, temporary for Warrick and Harry of course, and floored over to Oklahoma, which took about 15 of the craziest seconds of Harry's day. Floo travel was permitted to the school when it was during vacations, and even then only for the family members of a teacher.

They exited in Lisa's office, and Harry again had to resist the urge to poke around. He found teachers' offices fascinating, though only Josh Lyman would actually let him nose around.....and that was likely due to the fact that Harry wasn't taking his subject. Harry and Lyman had taken to meeting for breakfast on Sunday mornings, and continued their lively discussions from the summer, mostly about Britain. Other students were welcome at the table, Claudia always joined them, but the main focus was on the show being given by Harry and Lyman.

The Aylesworths' living quarters abutted their offices, and were quite spare, containing just a bedroom and a living area, in addition to the bathroom. Karl and Lisa were nowhere to be found though, but a note was placed on the door, directing them to the Dining Hall. They walked downstairs and found Karl and Lisa chatting with a couple of the other teachers, as well as some of the students. Fifteen were staying over this holiday, all of them with family situations similar to Sophie or Claudia.....plus Steve Atwood, who had no family period, his parents having died when he was nine years old. The parents saw them come in the door, and walked over to greet them.

"Merry Christmas you lot.....lot is what you say, right Harry?" For the most part Harry was amused when his British-isms got thrown back at him, but he decided to have a little fun here.

"No, you say 'lote'. Like tote, only with an 'L'" He could say Karl preparing to start practicing it, when his daughter rescued him.

"Don't listen to a word he says Daddy, Merry Christmas." She hugged her parents, they not having been awake when the three girls left. They were staying in one of the guest rooms upstairs, but had used the office floo to get to Warrick's.

“Merry Christmas Reiko, did you LOT have a good time over there?” Over there meant Britain, not the Forresters’, and Karl winked at Harry with the ‘lot’ emphasis.

“It was interesting Daddy, we’re glad we went.” The standard company line, and it worked.

“Glad to hear it, you boys are moving normally, didn’t have too much to eat?” Harry and Jonas both rolled their eyes.

“How many people do I have to hear about that from today?”

“Probably a few more, how does it feel to be a legend?” Everybody was a comedian.

“It’s a lote of fun Karl.” Karl started snickering, and slapped Harry on the back.

“Dinner’s going to be a little early tonight, go get settled.” He and Lisa walked over to check on the kitchen. Harry saw Steve Atwood eying him, and motioned him over. Steve was a medium everything kind of guy looks-wise, and quite bright if put in the right circumstance. He was toward the top of his class, and already planned to be a stockbroker or a money manager when he got out of school. He looked at Harry excitedly.

“Well, did they go for it?”

“Your terms were acceptable. Their only message was: ‘The sooner you get selling, the sooner you make money.’ Congrats Steve, you are now the seventh human employee of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes.” Seventh, after the twins, Harry, Lee, Ron, and Ginny.....though Ron’s employment would probably still be in flux for the next few months, Harry wouldn’t put it past Fred and George to fire him again soon. Harry shook Steve’s hand heartily.

“Cool, I can’t wait to start selling, this will be good experience for me. Oh yeah, I forgot to ask, what about an employee discount?” That

was tricky, since technically there wasn't one. Harry got his stuff free, and Ginny wasn't really big on pranking, nor was Lee. Harry genuinely hadn't thought of it, but made up something on the spot.

"Get selling first, and I'll see what the twins will find acceptable. There will be some kind of oath to be sworn obviously, so you don't start selling your discounted stuff." Steve just waved that off.

"No problem, just gin something up and I'll sign or swear, whichever. Do I have a quota to meet?" More uncharted territory, as Harry and the twins hadn't spent 20 seconds discussing the situation.

"Not at first, since this is a new market for us. Ask me again in a couple of months. Now what will happen is this: You put up the posters and do some demonstrations, drop my name if you have to, I don't mind it being used to sell WWW stuff. Twice a week Dobby will come by and see if there are any orders, if so, make sure he gets them. He'll deliver the goods back to you, and you distribute it to your customers. Any questions between his visits, see one of the Professors Aylesworth, since my owl Hedwig shuttles letters back and forth between Reiko and them. Any questions?" Atwood couldn't think of any right off hand.

"Nope, we're good. Now do I take my commission right off the top? Or wait?"

"Take it right off the top, but provide strict accounting paperwork for us. We're using this as a test market for this kind of thing, and your input will be invaluable. If things go smooth, you'll have this job for 2 ½ years no problem. In about 18 months we'll ask you to start thinking about your replacement, and to start grooming him, her, or them."

"Works for me."

"Now Steve, you know that I have to say something like this, so I'll just say it: Any funny business, and you answer to your customers, and I will do everything I can to help them get you. Understood?"

Harry said this in a flat tone of voice, with only a hint of threat, but his young employee didn't take it personally.

"Understood dude, no worries, as our Australian friends say." Michael Steele, born in Melbourne, said it all the time, though since he left as a baby he had no accent.

"Now, you're my boss right?"

"I suppose so, though this will likely be the last time we see each other before summertime, unless I come back sometime in the next week and a half. You'll deal with Dobby for the most part, and he's quite clever and resourceful.....and dangerous, he's almost killed me a couple of times." He left that last sentence unexplained, and walked off with an intrigued Steve behind him, contemplating. Oh it was good to be thought of as dangerous sometimes, Harry thought gleefully.

Dinner was a usual school holiday dinner, so nothing new for Harry or the others, who had experienced quite a few of them. Harry and Jonas each had one plate of food and one of dessert, but somehow managed to eat them without incident. Talk revolved around the school, and Harry learned quite a bit about the dynamics of Tecumseh compared with Great Lakes. There was a lot of political maneuvering amongst the schools, as Sophie had alluded to during their tour in August, and Harry learned that being a senior teacher, as Karl and Lisa both were, meant getting hip deep in that sort of thing. It turned out that Tecumseh's Deputy Headmistress, a 56 year old witch named Nicole Dolezel, was talking about retiring soon, and Lisa was being urged by many to go after the job. Karl wanted no part of it himself, but was one of those in favor of his wife applying. There was not a strict ratio among the Heads and Deputy Heads, where one had to be male and one female, but it was hardly a coincidence that three of the schools had it that way. Only Pathfinder, with two newly hired Wizards, broke that trend.

The meal ended at about the hour mark, and the gang and parents went back to Aylesworth Corner, as everyone around school called it, they being the only married couple amongst the faculty. They played

around with Reiko's new board games, as Reiko, Claudia, Karl, and Warrick played Shogun, with the others playing Risk. There were frequent interruptions by players of one game to kibitz the other, and a good time was had by all. Jonas took off a little early, the lure of having his large house to himself was too much to resist. As Harry and Warrick were about to leave an hour later, still having gotten no nookie from their women on the day, Karl stopped them, and asked for a word in private. Eyebrows raised, the two agreed readily, and the three of them walked out into the corridor. Karl first turned to Warrick.

"That was a nice present you gave Reiko, but the biggest one you give her is that you make her very happy. I know I'm supposed to be the protective father here, but I want you to know I'm in your corner. Same with you Harry, as I'm for all intents and purposes the adult male figure in Sophie's life, non-Great Lakes category. I'm glad you made your escape from over there, if only for Sophie's sake." Both boys were moved by this speech, and said so.

"Thank you Karl, I appreciate that."

"Me too Karl, you know I'll continue to treat your daughter right."

"You're welcome boys. Now I want to ask you about something Harry, how much did that trunk of yours cost?" It had been all he could do not to ask about it during the board games, but Lisa still didn't know how seriously he was contemplating a purchase. Karl and Lisa made the exact same salary, as they had the same seniority, they rotated the Advanced classes, and each had a private fund for frivolous spending. Karl was now trying to ascertain how much of his fund would need to be spent.

"The one I got for the island cost 1,400 galleons, which is roughly \$10,000. Why? Are you thinking of buying one?"

"I am, though that's a little more than I had thought to pay. Anyone with a trunk like that can use that floo?"

“Yes, but only that kind of floo, they aren’t hooked into the regular floo system.”

“That’s too bad, but no matter.” Harry had a thought.

“You know, if you get one, you’re welcome to use the island whenever you want to.” Karl had thought of that, and had figured that Harry would make that kind of offer. It was still a nice gesture though.

“Thank you, I appreciate that Harry. Now how much hassle would it be to get a trunk if I decide to?”

“Not much hassle at all really, just let me know and I can have Dobby or one of the twins get it. I mean, assuming the time zones work, you could have it an hour after you get me the cash.” That was fast action.

“I’m going to talk to Reiko’s mother about it, and I’ll get back to you. I think something like that has a lot of value, and would be potentially very handy to have around.” He didn’t explain his ‘bomb shelter’ comparison, and was relieved when neither boy asked.

“Tell you what Karl, when do you relinquish acting Head duties?”

“Professor Dolezel is due back tomorrow, why?”

“Why don’t you and Lisa take a day on the island, just the two of you. Say, Friday, when Sophie and Reiko are off with mother Weir. All you have to do is floo over to Warrick’s, and we’ll get you situated from there.” Karl just held up a finger, and went back inside for a minute. He came out smiling.

“That’s a plan, we’ll take you up on it. Thanks, that’s very nice of you Harry.”

“You’re welcome, just come by whenever you want, and if Warrick and I aren’t there, Dobby and Winky will do the honors.” Karl nodded, and soon thereafter the two of them floored back to Indianapolis.

Thursday, December 26, 1996

Warrick and Harry got their private time with Reiko and Sophie this day, as all six of them went to the island for a day in the sun. Harry/Sophie and Warrick/Reiko each staked out their own spots on the island, leaving Claudia and Jonas to their own devices for a few hours. Nothing amorous happened, but the two of them were now back to normal finally, with Claudia now able to tease Jonas about his witches of the day. This is not to say that Jonas did not get his Ray Elwood shots in, but they were soundly deflected. They resisted temptation to try to prank the couples, and were rewarded when Harry decided that life was too short, and quiet time with Sophie too precious, to prank them in this time and place.

Friday, December 27, 1996

Forrester House

8:30 am

Claudia tumbled out of the floo into an empty living room. She looked around, not seeing either Warrick or Harry, and not hearing any noise from the kitchen, headed upstairs, more on impulse than anything else. Warrick never locked his bedroom door, a pointless exercise in a world with Alohomora, and she walked in to find Warrick still asleep.....but the top bunk was empty. She shook Warrick awake inside a few seconds. To say that he was not pleased to see her was one of life's understatements.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? I was in the middle of the best dream, Reiko and I were.....” He didn’t get a chance to finish before Claudia interrupted him, not wanting any graphic details.

“Where is Harry? He had better not be following Sophie.” Warrick rubbed the sleep from his eyes for a moment before answering, though it was not the answer that Claudia was expecting.

“Why the hell did you barge into my room uninvited? Have you heard of knocking?” Claudia was brought up short by Warrick going on the offensive like this, and on such short notice. Still, she gave both barrels back to him.

“Don’t change the subject, where’s Harry?” Warrick was still only half awake, and this was not the type of alarm clock to warm his heart.

“None of your damn business for the moment, now get downstairs and I’ll be with you in a minute. Unless you’d like to watch me pee?” In point of fact, Claudia did not want to witness this, so, red faced, she went downstairs and sat on the couch, fuming. Warrick took his sweet time in the bathroom, brushing his teeth as well, before putting on some shorts and a t-shirt, and slowly walking downstairs. He stood in front of his friend, arms folded, though on the inside he was chortling.

“Now in answer to your questions, Harry is not following Sophie right now.” Claudia waited for him to go into further detail, but he didn’t. She asked the obvious.

“Where is he then?”

“And how is that any of your business?” Warrick had spoken to her like this before, but not very often. Claudia’s leadership of the gang had been abrogated for the most part, though not necessarily to Harry. Harry was the leader when it came to pranks and out of town trips, but otherwise the group was now more or less without a head. Warrick and Jonas now felt a lot more free to do what they wished, and throw their input around, with Harry making the male/female ratio even. All of this had not escaped Claudia’s attention mind you, and she was adjusting accordingly, and without a whole lot of rancor. She softened her approach in this instance particularly, though she was getting suspicious for other reasons.

“Warrick, c’mon. What’s the big deal?” This succeeded somewhat, though Warrick had really just been busting her chops for her earlier entrance, and making a point or seven.

“He’s in Britain right now, he wanted to talk to that Travis Biller guy, the one who was in the med station that night. He, Jonas, and I promised Reiko that we wouldn’t try any funny business with Sophie’s visit, and believe or not, we’re men of our word.” Claudia, no dummy, caught the loophole in that statement, and proceeded to drive the proverbial truck through it.

“So whose tailing them then? Dobby? Winky?” Warrick started chuckling, Claudia was pretty quick, probably more savvy than Reiko and Sophie in a lot of ways.

“Both of them actually. They can walk around and not be seen, so we figured what’s the harm. They’ll only step in if it looks like something bad is going down, and they know that. Now tell me a downside to that?” Claudia, in point of fact, could not, and conceded the point.

“All right, all right, I can see why you guys would want to do that. Those two are very handy to have around. I think the rest of us need to find some offbeat house elves when we graduate. I’m sorry for getting in your face before.” The apology wasn’t perfunctory, so Warrick easily accepted it.

“No problem. Thank your lucky stars I wear pajamas though, or you would have gotten a show. Your first stop was the Steeles’?” The whole following thing had been Jonas’ idea in the first place, and Reiko surely would have told her this.

“It was, Jonas is in the office with his dad again. He’s been doing that a lot lately during the holiday, I wonder what’s up with that? He never showed much of an interest before.”

“I think one of his asshole cousins has got his eye on the business, thinking that Jonas is going to ignore everything and play Quodpot for 15 years. Our boy is just feeling a little proprietary is all. Plus, I think those twins have infected him. They’ve shown that you can run a business and have a good time simultaneously. I have to admit that they may be on to something.” Claudia nodded, and tried to steer the conversation back to Harry.

“So what did he want with Travis Biller?”

Flashback to the previous day.

Dear Travis,

Hello there, I hope this note finds you well, and that you had a peaceful Christmas. There is something I'd like to talk to you about, and I would prefer to do it face to face. It's nothing heinous or security related though, or anything of that nature. I was wondering if I could buy you lunch at The Leaky Cauldron and we could talk there. I can come in via portkey at the time of your choosing, just let me know when.

Thanks,

Harry Potter

Dear Harry,

Christmas was very quiet here, thanks for asking, I can hardly believe it myself. Your letter certainly was intriguing, and I'm happy to have a chat with you. I'm not free for lunch tomorrow, but I do have a thing at the Auror Academy in the early afternoon. Why don't you come with me and get a lay of the land, and we can talk there. There are few more secure places in our little corner of the world than there. If this is fine, just plan to meet me at WWW at 2:00 pm. If not, send Dobby back and we'll work out an alternate arrangement.

Looking forward to it,

Travis Biller

At a few minutes before the appointed time, a still sleepy eyed Harry came into the front of the shop. The twins weren't around, they were doing some buying of supplies, so Harry had a chat with Lee Jordan. Lee was in the know about the trunk system, so Harry didn't have to make up a story of how he got there. He was still dating the muggle woman that the twins had talked about during the island getaway, but

was not any closer to telling her about his magic, wondering how and when to go about it. Harry had no advice to give on that score, he found it difficult to believe he could ever want to date a muggle now, especially given his experience with Sophie's father. The one downside to that attitude was that it greatly narrowed one's romantic choices, but there was a price to pay for everything really.

There weren't any customers in WWW at that moment, and Harry took a good look around at all the displays, finding it a bit odd to be here in the daytime, he usually came at night in the UK. He was pleased to note that the display for Harry Potter's DIY Howler Kit was nice and large, and prominently located. The twins had done a hard sell one Sunday night before the holiday, convincing him to put his name on it, but in the end he had acquiesced. He was rather proud that on at least one occasion he could provide creative ideas on what to sell, not just how to sell it. Lee informed him that the product was now the best selling one in the shop, and only the Talking Temporary Tattoos were even close, and that's only because the twins added a few that were X-rated, language wise. This appealed to the early 20's crowd, a relatively untapped market that WWW was now trying to reach.

At a minute past the hour, Travis entered the shop. He spotted the two of them at the counter, and walked over.

"Harry, good to see you." They shook hands.

"Likewise Travis, do you know Lee Jordan?" Both of the other men nodded greetings to each other.

"We've met, how goes the pranking business Lee?"

"Just great Travis, thanks. Our young friend here is a big help. He's opened up another American pipeline for us." Harry gave Travis the 30 second report on Steve Atwood. Biller chuckled out loud, but inside he was not too pleased, he really wanted Harry as an Auror when the time came, and the bigger WWW became, the less likely his hopes would be realized.

“You ready to go?”

“Sure, we going by portkey?”

“We are, it’s the only way to get there. There is no floo access to The Isle of Man, since all we have there is the Academy, and we need to keep it secure.” He took a length of bungee cord from his robe pocket and motioned Harry to grab on.

“Um, you guys might want to do that outside the shop, we have wards against portkeys and Apparition in here, you know, just in case.” The twins had told Harry about this, but it had slipped his mind this early in his American morning. They also had hidden Dark Detectors in every corner and on various spots on the ceiling, but that was privileged information that Biller didn’t really need to know about. Harry and Travis walked outside a couple of steps, and before anyone could spot Harry:

“Activate!”

They did the requisite spinning, and wound up outside a nondescript brick building, with a lovely view of the water though. There was a small hole in the wall, next to the one door, and Biller put his wand through it. The door gave off a glow, and Travis opened it.

“One of our security precautions, only someone from the DMLE or the faculty here can open it.”

“The students can’t?”

“ No they can’t, they’re not allowed outside without special permission, and even then always with a chaperone. The island is not that big compared to the mainland or Ireland, and we do rather stand out in a crowd. The rest of the island is all muggle of course.” Biller was wearing his Auror robes, while Harry had on his winter parka over his Weasley sweater and a pair of jeans. They walked inside, with Biller re-locking the door behind them.

“Why put it here then? Why not someplace in the Orkneys or somewhere like that?” Biller had no idea really, just a theory or two.

“Who can say? Some Minister of Magic or DMLE Head at some point in time must have been a Manxman perhaps, or liked coming here on holiday.” The building they were entering had a very high ceiling, though it was not apparent from the outside, it was done magically. It was so high, in fact, that Harry idly wondered if they taught flying combat in here. He had never heard of anything like that, it’s not something that Ripley had ever mentioned in class, though he had not gone into great detail about American Auror training. Harry did not know this yet, but the first day of Basic Combat as a Senior/Seventh Year was always a tour of the American Auror Academy and a lecture from its Auror in Charge.

“I know I should have asked before now, but what is it you have to do here today?” They walked down one of the hallways, toward what appeared to be a medium size conference room at the end. Harry could see a group of people in it, all wearing bright red robes.

“I have to give a talk about our Hogsmeade victory from last month. Did one of the twins show you a memory of it?”

“They did, a great victory for our side. I was sorry about Hestia and Daedulus though, I liked them.” He did not know the other two Order members who had died, both having been recent recruits. Travis looked thoughtful for a moment.

“I did my Academy work here with Hestia, she was a good Auror, and a good friend. Your boys both fought well though, Tonks was raving about them afterward.”

“They know what to do when the chips are down.”

“You’ve trained them well.” Harry waved that off.

“Everyone exaggerates that, including Fred and George, wait, especially Fred and George. I was better for them than any of our

Defense teachers, I'll admit to that much, but that isn't saying a whole lot." Travis stopped outside the door, waiting before opening it.

"Harry, you don't seem to get it. You're an example. That's why you inspire people like you do. You don't rant and rave, you don't pontificate or make promises you either can't or won't keep.....you act, and you apparently don't realize how rare that is in our little world. That's why the twins and your other friends have followed you, that's why Rufus was so eager to get you in The League."

"Yet when all I did was act, I kept getting into one mess after another." True, but that was beside the point, thought Travis.

"Nobody said you were perfect Harry, but you are decisive, and that attracts followers. Look at the way you left the country. Now yes, I know that Peter Tyson advised you, and I'm sure Bill Weasley was involved too, but the decisions were ultimately yours, and it came off without a hitch. It got Snape put into a wall, then arrested for crying out loud, that alone would get you a hero's parade down the main drag of Diagon Alley if you had wanted it.. Yes, you got some flack for leaving, but not that much, and I bet half your Howlers were from crackpots who send one to Rufus every day. Now I don't have much use or respect for that Order of Dumbledore's, but I tell you this: if you had stuck around and formed a splinter faction, it would have been twice the size of Dumbledore's, not counting defections from him to you." This rocked Harry, coming from a neutral observer, and a professional Dark Wizard fighter to boot.

"You really think so?" Biller leaned close, and whispered, after making sure that no one inside the conference room was trying to listen in.

"I do, and that's why the old man is scared shitless of you, and I'm betting our friend Voldemort is as well, though both will pretend otherwise. Dumbledore kept you under tight wraps the last two summers because he was afraid of what's happening now, that his weapon would begin to think for himself." In all his anger/hate/resentment filled thinking about Dumbledore, it had never really occurred to him that the old man was scared of him. This would

bear thinking about, if only for an avenue to torment Dumbledore, he didn't think the Howler assault had bothered his old Headmaster too much, if at all.

"Anyway, let's get inside, we are beginning to attract some undue attention to ourselves out here." Without further ado, he opened the door and walked in, with Harry following, closing the door behind him. There were about 25 men and women in red robes seated in the conference room, though all stood when Biller entered the room. There were two classes at the Academy, a first year group and a second year one, and the class sizes varied depending on the needs of the various governments: Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Ireland. The course officially was two years plus, the plus being the trials. The trials were a set of tests, performances, and other duties that each trainee had to pass in order to become full fledged Aurors for their respective countries. The trials could be completed in as few as three weeks, or take up to a year, depending on the aptitude of the student, and sometimes on blind luck. The Auror-in-Charge of the Academy, and Governor of all this, was currently a 45 year old New Zealander named Craig Parker, and he re-introduced Biller to this class, the first year one.

"You all remember Travis Biller, the Head Auror for the British Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He's here to talk to you about the Battle of Hogsmeade Village that took place a few weeks ago."

"Sit down people, sit down. This is my friend Harry Potter, he'll be observing today." Everyone in the room knew who Harry was in some shape or manner, hence the simple introduction. Biller's lecture gave the background history of the war, and described how Fenrir Greyback's forces fit into the picture, and how they were allied and used by Voldemort. Harry found out some interesting facts about the aftermath, namely that the alliance between Voldemort and Greyback seemed to have disintegrated. It seemed that the werewolf was suspicious that the bad man had set him up for destruction, something heightened by Voldemort's refusal to part with the 50,000 galleons that the werewolf felt was owed him. The deal had been half

upfront, and half upon completion of a successful attack.....and to call that attack successful, well it just couldn't be done.

How Biller knew all this was that the DMLE now had a mole in Greyback's organization, though he wouldn't admit that in front of the students, or even Harry. The mole was Castor Archer, the large werewolf who lost his sister in the attack. In fact his sister had been killed by one of his fellow lycans, and that had devastated him, forcing him to reevaluate his role in the fight. He made contact with Biller and, without any promise of payment, started funneling him information. Archer made it clear from jump though, that Remus Lupin was not to be told, nor was The Order of the Phoenix. Greyback had dropped so many hints about Lupin's potential loyalty problems that Archer had started to believe them, and everyone knew that the Order was probably infiltrated by Voldemort's people at the very least. Biller had still coerced Bones and Scrimgeour into coughing up some payment for his new informant, something that was relatively easy to facilitate, as the werewolves did not live together in one big commune, rather in individual homes. Dumbledore's vision of some big Greyback hideaway was mistaken, though the head werewolf did not mind the impression.

For the next part of his talk, Biller used a pensieve already delivered to show three different viewpoints of the battle. Used were his own memory, plus ones from Tonks and Auror Sanford Jenkins, who by chance had been the first Auror to make contact with the enemy. Harry was fascinated by all three memories, especially the part in Tonks' where she and the twins had nailed three Death Eaters at point blank range with the killing curse. He had a very visceral reaction when Edward Grant tore apart Hestia Jones, and cheered along with the others, involuntarily for most of them, when the Death Eaters went into full retreat. Biller ended the lecture by describing what the Ministry and its DMLE were doing at present to protect the populace. It turned out that a decision on Hogsmeade was still being debated in the still reduced Wizengamot, and all it's denizens and businesses had been transferred to London and Diagon Alley respectively. The total presentation lasted almost two hours, and Harry found it quite fascinating, Travis had a strong Scottish brogue that made Harry more than a little nostalgic. Biller took questions for another half hour, though Harry still kept silent during this time too,

feeling that it was not his place. Even so, the two dozen plus students asked pretty much everything he would have wanted to anyway, and he could always ask Biller privately if he thought of something.

The meeting broke up at just after 4:30 pm GMT, and the students filed out of the room. The Hogwarts alumni, which numbered six in this class, all had a friendly word for Harry as they left, even though the younger man could only put names to four of them, and wasn't too familiar even with them. Soon it was just Travis, Harry, and Craig Parker in the room, as the two Aurors were finishing up some housekeeping details. After a couple of minutes, Parker shook Harry's hand and said his goodbyes, saying that he hoped he and Harry would meet again sometime, as his term at the Academy still had a little over two years left to run.

"So what did you think Harry?"

"Very interesting, seeing a battle like that from a memory. Now I understand why people were so quiet while I showed my memory in the hospital room. Very riveting, kind of like a snuff film." Obviously he did not mean riveting in a good way. Biller looked curiously at him.

"What's a snuff film?"

"I just heard the term recently myself, it's a muggle film of an actual murder, not one re-created with actors or anything. Snuffing someone out is another term for killing them."

"And they film that kind of thing? Those muggles really are barbarians sometimes." After watching the carnage in that memory, Harry thought no one in the Magical World should be even picking up a stone, much less throwing one, but he kept that sentiment to himself for the time being.

"I gather that they're pretty rare in any case, more an urban legend than anything."

"I would hope so. Anyway, sorry about the rush getting over here, this got moved up since I sent that letter to you. What did you want to

talk with me about?" Travis was assuming something about the war, Rufus, or Dumbledore, or any combination of the three. What he was not expecting was Harry's reply.

"I was hoping that you could tell me about my parents." A shocked look appeared on Travis' face.

"About James and Lily?" Harry couldn't help but smile.

"Imagine my surprise if they are not one and the same. Yes, I would like you to, if you don't mind."

"Well I'll be glad to, of course, but I'm sure Remus Lupin could tell you much more than I ever could." Harry now stopped smiling, surprising Travis.

"I'm sure he could too, but he doesn't seem too willing. Either there's a skeleton there somewhere that he does not want to unearth, or he genuinely finds the subject to be too painful. Sirius Black was the same way, I could never get much more than vague generalities out of him, no matter how hard I pressed him about it, and there were a few times when I pressed really hard. When I say 'tell me about them', I'm not talking adventures, or even stories.....I mean, just what were they like as people? No one will tell me that kind of stuff Travis, and it's very frustrating. When you told me in the med station that they would have been proud of me, well that got me to thinking, and that's why we're here today. It's one of the few things that would have gotten to me to show my face in Wizard Britain this winter." That and the Weasleys, but that was private, not public, Harry thought.

"Well sure Harry, I guess I'm still a bit rocked that you don't know much about them. At least tell me that you have, or have seen, pictures of them."

"That is one thing I have of them, yes. After first year Hagrid put together a photo album for me."

"Not to change the subject for a second, but how have you and he been since the breach?"

“I’ve sent him a couple of letters, trying to explain things from my side, but nothing back from him. Neville writes that he won’t even say my name out loud.” Hermione rarely mentioned Hagrid in her letters, as she had declined to continue with Care of Magical Creatures. Said class had been Ron’s best OWL score, so he had carried on with it, as had Neville, though Ron’s letters averaged about five sentences each, so there wasn’t much space to talk about a whole lot beyond Quidditch and Hermione.

“He owes Dumbledore big time though Harry, so don’t be too hard on him, Dumbledore gave him a life.”

“I’m not hard on him Travis, don’t worry. Out of sight, out of mind.” And he was, outside of telling Hogwarts stories, Harry rarely thought about Hagrid anymore. A bit cold perhaps, but the gentle half-giant had been the one to cut things off, and Harry had no interest in begging.

“Fair enough, back to Lily and James. What were they like? I mean do you want something more specific?” Harry threw out the first thing that came to mind.

“Who was nicer?”

“Lily, and it’s not even close. That’s not saying James was a wanker, but no one was nicer than Lily. Even when she was a second year she was helping the firsties, way before she was ever made Prefect. I doubt I would have made it to class the first day if she hadn’t helped me.”

“So he wasn’t a wanker?”

“No he wasn’t.....well not as a whole anyway. Every teenage kid is a wanker at some point, even you are if you look at it right. Look, I’ve heard about that pensieve memory that Snape showed you, the Snivellus one, and that memory is not representative of James, at least on the whole. That’s how he was with Snape mind you, but if anyone deserved it, it’s Snape.”

“How did you know about that? How did you know that Snape had let me see that?”

“Dumbledore mentioned it right after you took off back in August. He was talking to Bones about it, and I happened to be there. I gather that Snape had confessed to him that he let you see it, hoping it would make you dislike James.”

“It did, for quite awhile.”

“Snape isn’t totally devoid of cleverness you know, of course the old man was an idiot letting you two be alone together for that long a time. I’m only surprised he didn’t let you see it earlier. Imagine letting Snape loose inside your mind, I swear Harry, when my kids are old enough, I’m not sending them to Hogwarts.”

“I know Dad wasn’t the git I saw in the memory, but it rocked me to see how cocky he was.”

“Well he was to Snape, but it was not at all one-sided. Snape and his cronies were just as nasty to Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs as well, even more so if you want one biased opinion. Snape was the worst though, because he was the leader. He corrupted a lot of Slytherins in his day, especially his last two or three years, more than a few turned out to be good soldiers for Voldemort.”

“So why did Dumbledore believe him when he said he turned?”

“Like I told you back in September Harry, because he really wanted to believe that Snape had turned. It was considered quite a triumph for our side, at least to those who knew about it.” Harry had often thought of that argument, but just couldn’t believe that Dumbledore was so naïve as to believe in hope, at least when it came to a hardcore Death Eater.

“So he wanted to be seen as Snape’s savior or something like that?”

“In a sense. Dumbledore, for all his myriad of faults, really does want the best for people. The thing is, his filter has gone faulty, and he has a hard time judging who’s playing him and who isn’t.”

“He sniffed out the Snape thing last month didn’t he?” Travis rolled his eyes.

“That was just Voldemort and Snape being careless, they thought they could pull anything they wanted on the old man. I wonder how bad Snape got tortured afterward?”

“I thought you had someone selling you information?”

“We do, but the bad man wouldn’t do that kind of thing in front of the other troops. Besides, we only buy specific pieces of intelligence, not Death Eater gossip.”

“That makes sense, only so much fat on the calf I guess.”

“Things are much better under Rufus, or at least more professional. Anyway, back to James and Lily.”

“How did Dad and Dumbledore get along?”

“Pretty well toward the end, especially after he and Lily got together. The Head Boy and Girl had a lot of clout back then, and the three of them all seemed to be pretty tight. Remember, Lily was hired as a teacher pretty quickly, after only one year out of school, so she and Dumbledore had to have gotten along really well in order for that to happen.”

“You said ‘toward the end’?”

“Well James and his buddies were hell raisers for a long time, and nearly set records for detentions. McGonagall in particular was hard on them, the guys being in her house.”

“I can certainly understand that.” Like most people, Travis had heard about the Howler campaign, and the McGonagall aspect of it in particular, and it brought a smile to his face to see Harry’s reaction to a mention of her.

“She didn’t like Snape either, don’t worry. He had to clean her classroom more times than I could count. I was amused when I heard that the old man hired him, forcing Snape to work with a faculty that all had loathed him as a student just a few years earlier.”

“How did Dumbledore and Snape get along when Greasy was a student?” Travis hesitated, as if unsure how much conjecture to put into his answer.

“They were somewhat diplomatic with each other, surprisingly enough. While under Snape’s influence, the nastier Slytherins didn’t take too many potshots at the old man, and Dumbledore recognized that he needed Snape to keep those people in line, so he took a hands off approach.” Oh my goodness, thought Harry. That explained so much.

“What about the head of Slytherin?” Biller started laughing sarcastically.

“Ah yes, Desmond Askew, the Potions Master.....oh brother. He tried very hard to act the part of a hardcore Slytherin, but he was kind of a joke. I also think that Askew was kind of afraid of Snape too, at least in the last couple of years, though Greasy did nominally defer to him. Because I wanted to be an Auror, I had to take Potions all the way through, so I sympathize with you putting up with Snape all those years. Askew wasn’t a half bad teacher mind you, I mean when he could be bothered, he knew what he was doing. Dumbledore wouldn’t put up with crappy teaching, not in that class. Defense yes, Potions no.”

“What wound up happening to him? Did Snivellus replace him?” He knew that this was one of those things that he should know already, but he had never actually read ‘Hogwarts: A History’, no matter how

often Hermione had hectored him to. Maybe he should now, sometime during the break.

“Yes he did replace him, after Askew was killed.” Huh?

“Killed? How? Wasn’t the war over by then?”

“He was killed by a jealous husband Harry, he was putting his wand where it didn’t belong.” Harry was caught short for a second, then doubled over in laughter.

“You cannot be serious, really?”

“Oh my yes Harry, I was one of the arresting Aurors. I was in Rufus’ crew then, and we had to bring the husband, who shall remain nameless, as you’ve likely heard of him, to trial. He was acquitted of course, he hadn’t used anything more than Mobilicorpus...he flung him and the wife around the room. The wife survived, she was most willing to allow Desmond free reign, so to speak. Desmond didn’t though, and Snape was brought in a few days later, much to everyone’s horror of course.” Harry, though fascinated by the change of subject, brought things back around to his father.

“Was he a good Quidditch player? Dad I mean.”

“I was going to say, Snape didn’t know which end of a broom to get on.”

“I know, I know, I’ve gotten away from the original subject.”

“It’s okay, you have to deal with the idea of Snape and Dumbledore in your present, it’s only natural to want some insight into them. James was a great Quidditch player, he played professionally remember. He was our best Chaser for years, and on the team for six. I made the team my second year too, I played Beater.”

“What about Mom, did she ever fly?”

“She did for fun, but she never went out for Quidditch. She said that flying was great stress relief.” Sophie had said the same thing to Harry months earlier, though he only vaguely remembered it.

“Was she popular with the others?”

“Harry, everyone liked Lily Evans, trust me. Well the Slytherins didn’t, since she was muggleborn, but this was during a period of time when the faculty actually looked out for those kinds of students, so there were no incidents. The word ‘mudblood’ was guaranteed to get the user a detention.”

“Why isn’t it like that anymore?”

“Who knows? It’s a different world now from when I was in school. A different Hogwarts.”

“Not for the better I’m thinking.” Travis just shook his head sadly.

“No Harry, not for the better at all. I mean there are still some good teachers there, Flitwick, Sprout, even McGonagall is a good instructor, however her failings as an administrator.”

“I wonder what my mom was like as a teacher, I need to find someone who had her and visit them with a pensieve.”

“Look no further Harry, my wife had her in third year. I’ll see what I can do about getting you some memories of that.” It was all Harry could do not to start misting up at hearing that. Photos were one thing, but a memory was quite another.

“Thank you Travis.” The gratitude was palpable, and Biller had rarely felt more sorry for any kid than he did this one.

“Look Harry, I’m going to speak to Lupin about this, and at least find out why he’s been hiding this part of your life from you.”

“I just figured that Dumbledore told him to or something.”

“That’s no excuse, there is pressure I can bring against Lupin, so expect a heart to heart the next time you come back over here. I know he can’t go over there to see you.”

“He would only be tripping about two dozen wards and alarms.”

“That few?” Harry laughed.

“What were the four of them like? The Marauders?” Biller gave Harry a sad look.

“Go ahead Harry, ask it, it’s okay.” Harry went quiet, thinking.

“Yes, okay I will. Was there any hint that Pettigrew was turning Dark? Was there an inkling by anyone? On this subject I couldn’t get a syllable out of Sirius or Remus, much less a word.”

“Hindsight is always 20/20, as the muggle saying goes. Yes Harry, in retrospect there were things that might have looked suspicious if looked at in precisely the right way, and I’m sure that was one thing that drove Black almost suicidal while he was in Azkaban.....remember, he had a long time to work it out in his mind, being in there 12 years and all. Remus was probably similar, and I have no doubt that it contributed to his vagabond life.”

“What signs?”

“Harry, you have to understand something about Peter Pettigrew, and I’m in no way, shape, or form excusing what he did.....but he was the fifth wheel in that group, the least powerful Wizard in that crowd, at least compared with James, Sirius, Remus, and eventually Lily. In a way he’s a bit like your friend Neville.”

“Neville is probably more powerful than the others though, except for me.”

“But he never believed it, not until last year. Pettigrew was the same way, he always felt that he would be in their shadow. And unlike Neville, he did not have a strong family to give him guidance. Pettigrew’s family were minor Wizards, and a lot of their progeny turned out squibs. To come up with someone as smart and powerful as Peter.....well they weren’t prepared for it, and more or less left it to the Blacks and Potters to guide him. You know what the Blacks were like, and James’ family just had a hard time taking Pettigrew seriously.”

“So that’s all it is? A lack of guidance?”

“Think about yourself Harry, what would you be like right now if not for the Weasleys or Hermione Granger? Given all you had to deal with: Dursleys, Snape, Dumbledore, Voldemort. How would you have wound up? Perhaps not in Azkaban, or even in self-imposed exile, but you would not be the better for it. You might even be a more lethal version of Draco Malfoy.”

“No, I see your point. But didn’t Pettigrew have Dad and Sirius, and Remus?”

“Yes, but Remus turned out to have his own issues, and James and Sirius weren’t the protective sort. Oh Pettigrew was fully one of them, but they never really loved him, like they did each other.....not that kind of love of course, you know what I mean.”

“I do, don’t worry.”

“ Anyway, it was probably mostly in Pettigrew’s mind, some imagined slights, or maybe even real ones, I don’t know. I wasn’t around them enough to know what went on privately.”

“Was Pettigrew popular?”

“Because of the others, sure. He was a decent enough guy though, he wasn’t nasty to the younger years, and he was a good student. Look Harry, if your dad, Sirius, and Remus couldn’t figure it out, then no one could, I mean they made him Secret Keeper for crying out

loud. Pettigrew hid his demons very, very skillfully. He may not have been the best brain of the five of them, really he was the least, but ultimately he proved to be the most clever and cunning..” Harry sat there for a minute and pondered that.

“Did you consider Dad to be a friend?”

“Oh sure, I was a guest at his and Lily’s wedding.”

“I’ll have to look through the pictures for you, I don’t use that album too much, it’s kind of hard to look at.” Biller smiled ruefully.

“I can only imagine Harry.”

“Do you have any children?”

“My wife is expecting our first, she’s due in about four more months.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s a Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies, or she was anyway. She’s on maternity leave now, but she’ll be back next season. Rebecca is a few years younger than me, and we wanted to wait until she was on the downside of her playing career before trying for a family.”

“I’m the only child of the Marauders, what a waste Travis. Arthur and Molly managed seven incredibly talented kids, even Ron, but all four Marauders, all of whom were much more powerful than those two, somehow came up with just me.”

“Who is more powerful than any two Weasleys, even factoring in Bill.” Bill was considered the most talented Weasley in many a generation.

“It’s just such a ridiculous waste, all of this.”

“Like your muggle Rodney King over there, ‘Can’t we all just get along?’” Lyman had told him about it, so Harry understood the reference.

“And he only got beaten half to death to learn that. Do we all need something like that?”

“I’d rather not be clubbed half to death, if it’s all the same to you. I see your point though. I’ll give the Yanks this much, they have their magical house in order. Their Dark Wizards are nothing but money grubbers, but better than what amounts to being racists, like Voldemort and the Malfoys. No wonder it was a European Wizard who headed up the SS in World War II.” That would be Grindewald, aka Heinrich Himmler.

They talked about James and Lily for another hour, before Harry belatedly looked at his watch and saw that he had better be getting back, he wanted to be there when Sophie arrived, so he could hear about her outing.

“Thank you for this Travis, this means a lot.”

“I’m glad I could help, I never imagined that you didn’t know any of this, otherwise I would have volunteered it before this.”

“Blame our mate Dumbledore.”

“I know you’re not his biggest booster, but a lot of people share your feelings. Just be patient, he’ll get his comeuppance eventually, though hopefully not from anyone Dark.” A very important qualifier, as the two got up and headed out the conference room door. They walked out to the front door to take the portkey back, and just as they stepped outside, they were almost run over by two new portkey arrivals:

Dumbledore and Moody.

Travis immediately got an 'oh no' look on his face, while Harry just kept his hands in his pockets, his right hand on his wand, and his left on a portkey that Travis didn't know about.

"Hello Harry, Travis." Dumbledore was smiling heartily, as though this was a grand surprise. Harry didn't believe that for a second, as dozens of people had passed by that conference room, any one of whom could have tipped the old man off. Travis responded politely, wary of what Harry might say.

"Albus, Alastor. What brings you by?" Harry just stood there with a neutral expression on his face, hands in his pockets, and mental shields fully powered up.

"Just visiting Travis, we want to see the progress being made with the students. I'm sorry that we missed your talk to the first intake."

"You didn't miss much, you were there for more of it than I was."

"It's always nice to see other perspectives. Harry, how was your Christmas?"

"It was fine Albus, thank you. Yours?" Everyone noted the Albus part of it, though Harry had used it responding to Dumbledore's reconciliation plea. The tone was polite, if a bit disinterested.

"Also fine, thank you for the book. I paged through it last night, very interesting reading." Both Moody and Travis were wondering what book, but neither asked. Harry wanted to start laughing, Dumbledore pretending to enjoy *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, but he didn't dare show any emotion here.

"I thought it appropriate. Anyway, nice to see you both. Good day." Harry's pocketed wand had detected no wards recently thrown up, and he knew that all he had to do was say the word and he was gone. Biller had casually pulled the rope portkey out of his pocket as well, though his wand still remained in his other hand, from when he had unlocked the door.

“Harry, if we may speak for a moment.”

“We just spoke Albus, we had a perfectly polite little exchange, please don’t ruin it.” This had a little condescension to it, and Moody grimaced, while Dumbledore did color just a bit, but did not show it in his next remarks.

“A little more speaking perhaps Harry, you have nothing to fear from me you know.” Harry now smiled, though it was not a smile designed to bring comfort to his foe.

“Of course I don’t, since one more wrong move by you will make you suffer incalculably.”

“And how is that Potter?” Moody’s first sally into the conversation, said with his habitual gruff suspicion.

“Because, in the remote event that Trelawney was actually right in her prediction, then I can always refuse to cooperate when the time comes.”

“You wouldn’t do that Harry.” Said with more confidence than the old man felt perhaps. Harry’s confidence was more show as well, he knew he couldn’t stay out of it if his friends were in danger, but his actions over the last months had hopefully given Dumbledore enough pause that the old man could believe him capable of taking his ball and going home.....which was a primary reason he had done them in the first place. Always mess with their minds.

“Watch me Albus.”

“You would never do that to your friends Harry, please don’t waste our time by bluffing.”

“My friends can take care of themselves, and they’re fine with it. You should worry more about that floundering school of yours than about what I might be up to.....you know, me not being a student under you anymore.....thank God.”

“You received a fine education at Hogwarts Harry, you got out of it what you put into it.” Harry just shook his head tiredly.

“You will go to your grave thinking Snape was a good teacher, that alone makes you pathetic. Leaving aside the Defense catastrophes, which you of course lay to bad luck.”

“Mistakes were made, by more people than just myself. In your own way Harry, you are as unforgiving as Severus.” There were few things more designed to enrage Harry than to be compared with Snape, but he did not hex Dumbledore into next week all the same. His face colored bright red though, and Travis raised his wand, perhaps to put a barrier between the two.

“I forgave you for years Albus, it was only after you told me that my life was one big lie that I decided that you had committed one too many crimes to forgive you. Now I’m going back home, my girlfriend will be needing me soon. So sod off Albus, I hope I never see your lying, betraying face ever again.”

Dumbledore then did something very risky: He put his hand on Harry’s arm.

“Wait Harry, this is not how I wanted this conversation to go at all.”

“No, you wanted me to fall on my knees and kiss your feet, begging for forgiveness. Well that will never, ever happen Albus. I’ll kill myself before I do that, and I’ll somehow make you watch while I do it. Now take your bloody hand off me.” Dumbledore was a little taken aback by the vehemence, and also by the look in Harry’s eyes, a look he had always thought reserved for Voldemort, or at most Severus. He slowly removed his hand from Harry’s arm, not noticing that Moody was now pointing his wand at Harry, just in case. Harry had been very subtly edging his way over to Biller, and before Dumbledore and Moody could react, Harry reached out and grabbed onto the rope, hoping that Biller was gripping it hard enough.

“Activate!”

The two of them disappeared right in front of the older mens' eyes. Other than McGonagall, no one in the Order was more loyal to Dumbledore than Moody was, but even he was looking at the old man with contempt.

"Well that was nicely handled."

"Young people are very touchy Alastor."

"And young people you compare to Snape are especially so. That was stupid Albus, why you deliberately wanted to piss him off defies all reason." He then surprised Dumbledore by Apparating away, leaving the old man standing there by himself. Moody would not speak to Dumbledore for the rest of the year, just glaring at him at Headquarters. For his part, Dumbledore merely thought he was giving Harry a taste of his own medicine, and refused to believe that he had done anything wrong.

Harry and Travis re-appeared in front of WWW, and initially didn't say anything, just waiting to see if they were followed at all. There were no tracking charms on them, they made a point of checking, but it wasn't out of the question that Dumbledore or Moody could guess that they would come here.

"I hope that doesn't get you in any kind of trouble Travis, me telling him off like that."

"Don't worry about it Harry, I can handle Dumbledore, and if I can't, then Bones and The Minister can. What was that about your girlfriend? Is she in trouble?"

"I sure hope not, she's meeting her mother and brothers right now.....her parents kicked her out after first year, wanting her to reject magic. I facilitated a reconciliation with the mother, this is the fruit."

"You, a diplomat?" Said with humor, and Harry had calmed down enough to chuckle.

“I was a bit heavy handed about it, but I didn’t threaten any violence.” Travis looked dubious at hearing that, but declined comment on it.

“No luck on the father though? I believe his name is Peter?” Harry’s jaw hung open.

“That’s hard to know information Travis.”

“It’s our job to keep tabs on you Harry, and your associates. Once the Witch Weekly article became known to us, we did a little digging.”

“The fascination with The Boy Who Lives never ceases does it?”

“Actually the digging was at Witch Weekly itself, I personally had the writer Obliviated and her records altered before publication. I talked to one of the Aurors monitoring the Listening Charms on that house, and I agree that the guy is not likely salvageable.” Harry didn’t really know what to say to this.

“Why did you have her Obliviated?”

“Because she was going to publish Sophie’s birthplace and parents’ names, and muggles like that are such easy targets we might as well have just kidnapped them ourselves and handed them over to Voldemort. It can still leak of course, but no reason to make it easy on them.”

“Thank you Travis, I really appreciate that, and so will Sophie.”

“No problem Harry. Now you’d better get going, and I should too, a pregnant wife is best not kept waiting.” They shook hands, and Biller Apparated away, choosing not to do his Auror recruitment pitch at this time. Harry went back in the shop, the twins had not returned from their buying trip yet, so after a few words with Lee, Harry flooed back to Warrick’s. He walked downstairs to find Claudia and Warrick watching television and eating spaghetti. He had walked so quietly,

that they were startled when he spoke, spilling some food on the floor. He whipped out his wand and did a quick Scourgify.

“They not back yet?”

“You really shouldn’t sneak up on people like that Harry, geez.”

“Oh like you’re one to talk, trying to see me naked this morning. How did it go over there?”

“I got what I wanted, and I got to insult Dumbledore live and in person, so that was nice. But let’s get back to you scoping out a naked Warrick, dear Claudia.” Claudia was the target for the next 15 minutes, as a starving Harry made himself some pasta as well, his stomach finally back to normal. He was halfway through his plate when the floo fired, and Reiko and Sophie returned.

Flashback to 8:55 am EDT, Champaign-Urbana

Sophie and Reiko exited the floo station, and saw the golden arches of McDonalds off in the near distance, as they had a clear line of sight. There were floo stations, like this one, in every large city in The United States, as well as most college towns. They were situated mostly in Greyhound bus terminals, which were ubiquitous, and always had storage rooms used for this. It did help that Greyhound was owned by Wizards, indeed Jonas’ mother’s family held a small stake in the company.

They left the station and walked through the snow filled sidewalk to get to the restaurant. Sophie had been very nervous the night before, and had finally agreed to take a light sleeping potion at around midnight. It had done the trick, and she had slept like the proverbial baby. Reiko had gotten her up an hour before, and the two of them got ready in record time.

“You still nervous?” Sophie threw up her hands.

“Oh what do I have to be nervous about? I’m just seeing my mother for the first time in over four years, and my brothers too.” Well that would do it, thought Reiko.

“Relax Sophie, they want to see you, they’ve missed you. It’s not like Harry threatened them into coming.” Sophie did not like that topic to even be brought up.

“He wouldn’t do that.” Reiko believed that, to a point. She knew Harry would do anything to make Sophie happy, and would probably have few qualms about dropping some hints if he really had to. Reiko occasionally wondered at how Sophie and Harry had become so solid a couple so quickly. Warrick was right, Harry hadn’t browsed at all in looking for a girlfriend, and having gotten to know Harry as well as she had, Reiko marveled at how opposites really did attract, like immediately. Harry and Sophie were both shy on the outside, but Harry had a hardness on the inside that was only just beginning to melt away, though it was melting, Reiko acknowledged. This is not to say she was suspicious of Harry in any way, she thought he was a great guy, and she was glad Sophie was happy with him.

“Look, I saw the pensieve memory of what happened.....no, Warrick showed me, Harry doesn’t mind him using the pensieve when he wants to, it was weird extracting a memory that way let me tell you. Anyway, Harry clearly didn’t like your dad, but he was very polite and friendly to your mom and brothers, much more than my guy was, if truth be told. They’re here because they want to be.” Assuming they show up, Reiko thought darkly. She had outwardly dismissed Jonas’ theory about the parents, but had to admit that it had some credence. She had sent Claudia over to the Steeles’ and the Forresters’ to make sure that nothing idiotic would happen here, but Claudia was easily dealt with if the boys really were insistent on some kind of surveillance.

“I know they are, I should have thought of this with Ned and Jason years ago, meeting on the sly like this.” They got to the front doors of the restaurant, and hurried in, the cold outside not doing them any favors.

They were the first ones there, and each ordered a cup of coffee while they waited. The restaurant was not too busy at this time of day, with most of the students home for the holidays, so they saw when the Cadillac pulled into the sparsely filled parking lot. Sophie didn't recognize it, but knew that her parents and Jason were all driving different vehicles than when she had known them, Ned being 14 when she left. Sure enough, it was them, as the three of them piled out of the car, Ned having been the driver, this being his turf and all. They walked in and immediately spotted the girls. Sophie carefully placed her cup of coffee on the table, because of her shaking hands, and rose to greet her mother and brothers.

"Hi guys." Her voice was shaking too, as her mother gave her a hug.

"Oh Sophie, I'm so happy to see you. Let me have a look at you." She stepped back and looked at her daughter. Sophie had grown up in the four and a half years since Wendy Weir had seen her, she was no longer the little girl who had left them. Ned and Jason, for their parts, were a bit taken aback at how babe-like their little sister had become, this was worrisome. They stepped in and gave her a double hug.

"Good to see you sis, I'm guessing this is your friend Reiko." Reiko, who like Warrick, was a little ambivalent about seeing these people, stepped forward and shook hands with everyone, fixing a friendly smile on her face.

"That I am, Reiko Aylesworth, pleased to meet you all."

"It's good to meet you Reiko, I feel like I know all about you, from reading those letters." Reiko decided to break the ice a little, and amuse herself at the same time.

"All lies ma'am, Sophie is very delusional." Sophie took the ball and ran with it.

"I only brought her to look after her Mom, she's not right in the head." This did have the effect of loosening things up, and everyone relaxed a little.

“Did you girls have breakfast yet? Should we get something here? The boys and I just had some coffee and juice at home.” Sophie and Reiko looked at each other and nodded, they had so little access to fast food normally that it was quite a novelty for them.

“Sure, let’s eat her and talk some.” The five of them went back to the counter and placed their orders. A few minutes later, they were all seated at a large corner table, various breakfast sandwiches and things in front of them.

“How was your Christmas honey? Where did you celebrate it?” The girls looked at each other.

“We sort of had a three-pronged Christmas Mom. We had breakfast with Harry’s people in Great Britain, lunch with Warrick’s family in Indiana, and dinner at Tecumseh, where Reiko’s parents teach.”

“How on earth did you get to Great Britain and back like that? Did you take the Concorde?” Sophie took a second to debate on whether or not to explain the concept of a portkey to her family, and decided to give them the short version.

“Well we used magic Ned, we can.....well you remember Star Trek, and beaming up? Well we beam away, sort of.” A nice lay persons explanation, she would have to remember it to use again sometime.

“Wow, so you can go across oceans too? I mean you explained the floo thing in your letters, but I didn’t know you could go that far.” I didn’t either until a few months ago, thought Sophie amusedly, as did Reiko.

“It’s all in how you do it I guess. It’s very convenient though.” Jason could believe that.

“I bet. So how did you get along with Harry’s family? Wait, didn’t he say he was an orphan?”

“Well they’re more his surrogate family, his real one isn’t very nice from what he says, I’ve never met them obviously. The surrogate one is called the Weasleys, and he met four of the sons and the only daughter at school in Britain, their version of Great Lakes and Tecumseh, called Hogwarts.”

“Hogwarts? What a funny name, who would ever come up with something that strange to name a school?” Who indeed.

“And you liked them, these Weasleys?” Well aside from Ron, she had liked them all.

“We did, we had a very interesting time. Two of the brothers, along with Harry, own a joke shop. I’ve got some of their stuff here for you.” She pulled a few items out of her coat pocket. They included a couple of gravity reversing candies, a nose bleed nougat, and a few other things that didn’t need a wand to activate it, or reverse the effects, as she explained to them. She had dearly wanted to include a swamp, but that needed a wand to erase, and the American Ministry would not be too happy about having to come to the house to get rid of something like that. She had not actually gotten her mother a real Christmas present, she was not quite that forgiving. The boys had had theirs sent to their dorm rooms, and would be waiting for them when they returned.

“Fascinating, so that’s where Harry got his money? From this shop?”

“Oh no, he inherited it when his parents and godfather all died. The shop’s just a few months old. Remember, don’t use this stuff around other people.” She and Reiko gave what history about the shop that they knew from talking to the three owners. Sophie felt that this was nice, safe territory to be on, so she allowed it to continue while the group finished their breakfasts.

“So the other young man we met last week, Warrick, that was your boyfriend Reiko?”

“Yes ma’am, Warrick is stuck with me. He’s in our House at school, we’ve both known him since day one there, but he and I only started dating last year.”

“A House is like a dormitory then?” This was five year old information for Wendy, and she was a little rusty.

“More or less, there are about 85 of us in Cortez, including the two of us, Warrick, and Harry. Claudia is in another house called Shawnee, and Jonas and Drew, who we’ve recently become tight with, they’re roommates in still another one called Jefferson. The last one is Proctor, and none of our gang is in there.”

“I saw Lizzie Proctor speaking to the devil!” Sophie gave a mock annoyed look to her brother.

“Thanks Ned, like we’ve never heard hundreds of 11 year olds say that over the years.” She might even have said it herself, though she would never admit it now that she was older and more mature.

“One more won’t kill you.”

“I guess not, though it might kill you.”

“You can’t use magic sis, you’ve already told me the rules on that one.” Sophie mentally took a second to kick herself for that, but rallied quickly.

“Who said I would use magic?” She balled up her fist and tapped him on the nose with it. She really had missed this kind of teasing with her brothers. She did it with Warrick and Jonas, but this was different, she had really fond memories of playing with her brothers, from as far back as she could remember.

“Mom, make her stop that.” Wendy lovingly rubbed her daughter’s shoulder, it was hard for her to take her eyes off Sophie, after not having seen her for so long.

“Sorry no.” Everyone finished up their breakfasts, and started pulling on their coats.

“Where shall we go first?” Everyone seemed to be waiting for someone else to make a suggestion until Jason turned to his brother.

“Ned, this is your territory, where are we heading?”

“Let’s go look at my dorm.” There was general agreement on that, and the group headed off toward campus. The walk took about 20 minutes, and no one was in any hurry. They talked about Ned’s grades during his first semester, not a bad GPA at 3.50, the grades had been a nice Christmas Eve present for him. Ned lived in Snyder Hall, though it was not open during the holidays.

“Sorry I can’t show you my dorm room.”

“I’ve lived in a dorm for five and half years now Ned, I have the picture. Besides, I can only imagine what your room looks like.” Ned was a bit of a slob, and his room at Casa de Weir reflected that even now.

“No you really can’t, my roommate is a neat freak, so I clean my stuff up to keep him quiet.” Reiko had an idea, as they walked around the building.

“Ned, would anyone be inside right now?”

“I don’t know if anyone is in the manager’s office, but no students should be there, they have a designated hall for them to stay in. Why?” Reiko pulled out her wand.

“This is very good at unlocking doors, and unlike my young roommate, I’m legal to use it.” Reiko really did want to be nice and helpful, but felt that there was no real harm in showing them that she could use magic, just in case. Ned didn’t hesitate, he started walking back along the path they came from.

“C’mon, there’s a back door we can go to.” This would not be the first magic that the three muggles had ever seen. Former Headmaster Rydell, during his intervention, had done a little bit of magic, as had Josh Lyman, who had conducted the muggle orientation done with every muggleborn after they get their letter. Still, he was eager to see it again. They got to the door, and Reiko made them crowd around, as was the drill when in muggle territory.

“Alohomora”

The lock clicked, and the door swung open.....and Ned and Jason both had never felt more cheated in their lives, not being able to do this kind of thing themselves. Just seeing this trebled their sympathy for their father, though they still would never have kicked Sophie out, or so they told each other after this visit was all over.

They journeyed upstairs to Ned’s room on the second floor. He had not been bullshitting them, it was rather neat and tidy. It was a two person room, with a community bath down the hall. It was about one-third the size of a Great Lakes dorm room, with one bunk bed in a corner, rather than four beds each along a wall. Sophie told them these things, and agreed that it wasn’t too bad.

“I bet this is cleaner than your guys’ room over there.”

“You’d be right Ned, but only because Warrick’s kind of a pack rat. His room at home is pretty empty. I mean, there are no food wrappers or trash on the floor.” That was more due to Winky than anything, but that detail was a little too much to hit them with right now.

“And Harry?”

“He has a trunk that he keeps all his things in, except his clothes. He grew up poor, so he’s very careful with his stuff.” Sophie’s descriptions of Harry got more confusing every time she talked about him, or so her family thought.

“I thought he was rich?” Reiko stepped in.

“He is Mrs. Weir, but the aunt and uncle he grew up with didn’t know about the money, and they.....well they didn’t like the fact that he was magical, and so they tried to stamp it out of him.” She gave mental credit to Peter and Wendy Weir for at least not doing that.

“Yeah Mom, Harry’s story is a long one, I’ll have him tell it to you when you see him again.”

“Speaking of that honey, when do you have to go back to school?”

“Either a week from tomorrow or the day after, we’re still hashing it out.”

“Good, plenty of time for us to see each other again. Your father goes back to work Monday, he has a big trial coming up that he needs to prepare for.” Peter Weir was a very talented attorney, the bane of the Illinois Attorney General’s Office, who he was constantly taking on in case involving state law. Sophie smiled.

“That’s great, you can meet the others as well. Um Ned, where’s the bathroom? I think I had too much coffee.”

“Head left out the door, and it’s on the right, a few yards down.”

“Thanks, be right back.” Reiko went with her, and they waited until they were out of earshot to do any talking. While in adjacent stalls:

“So how do you think it’s going? Your family seems pretty nice.”

“They are.....it’s just so strange being around them again. They feel so.....I don’t know the word, so....”

“Foreign?”

“Something like that, yeah. Harry said the same thing the other day while we were at The Burrow, it was like he felt out of place there, even though he’d only been gone a few months. It’s been years for me, but I can relate.”

“I can understand that, I think every kid who goes to boarding school winds up feeling that way, I know I do. You just have to give it time, and everything will be back to normal-ish.”

“I hope so. I wonder if there’s any hope for Dad? I mean, you saw the way my mom came around.” Reiko badly wanted to ask if there was more to it than that, but couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

“I don’t know, give your mom some time to work on him. I mean he has to suspect something like this is going on, or will go on, but she’s still here, he didn’t stop her.” True, very true, thought Sophie in a rush. Jonas’ theories may have been paranoid, but they had occurred to Sophie as well. They finished their business, and went back to the Weirs, who had been pretty much doing the same thing, talking about Sophie and Reiko, though no urinating was involved.

They spent the next hour doing a lazy walk around campus, with Sophie being asked to fill in the blanks from her letters, that is, to expand on some of her stories. They heard all about Claudia and the three guys, and about her teachers, and some of the things that the two of them could do. Ned did some talking as well, though he had only been on campus for four months, he still had something to say about most every building or field that they passed. Sophie and Reiko found it to be a nice campus, but Ned’s selling job was going mostly into deaf ears. They both wanted sun and ocean for their college experiences, which of course they planned on doing together.

“How is your SAT work going?”

“I don’t know Mom, its hard to say. We’ve been studying the books we got for it, and we have a few Senior friends that we can quiz about it. We still have over two months, so I’m not too worried.”

“What’s your first choice right now for school?”

“We’re still debating that, we all want to go someplace together though, at least the four of us, so it will probably hinge on what our

lowest collective score is.. Jonas and Harry will be professional athletes, but because of the floo they can live wherever they want.”

It was just before noon now, and Sophie decided to end the visit while things were still going well. Everyone was a bit tired, and irritableness was just around the corner, for Witches and muggles alike. They were back in front of the McDonalds where they had hooked up, the Greyhound station only a couple of blocks away.

“Reiko and I should be going Mom, when can we do this again?” Wendy Weir was thinking the same as her daughter, end it now while they were still getting along. Too much too soon would not be healthy for their still fragile relationship. As Alexis de Tocqueville said, a society is never more vulnerable than when it begins to change for the better. That was often true of people as well, and relationships especially.

“How about a week from today? Bring the others too, I want to get to know your Harry a bit better.”

“That’ll be fine, I’ll check with them when we get back. I’ll call you on Monday from Warrick’s to confirm and figure out where to go.”

“That sounds great honey. Now Ned, Jason, will you excuse us girls for a minute? We need to talk about one more thing.” The guys shrugged, and walked away out of earshot. Wendy looked at her daughter, unsure how to put this, though Reiko had a look on her face of mild amusement.

“Sophie honey, you and Harry.....you’re being careful, right? I mean, do you magic people have fool-proof ways of birth control?” Even though she knew something like this was going to be asked at some point during the visit, Sophie still blushed furiously.

“Mom!”

“I know it’s awkward to talk about, and I really have little right after all these years. But there are talks I never got to give you.” Lisa

Aylesworth had done that job for Sophie, including talks about birth control.

“Harry and I are not having sex Mom, and while that will change probably, pretty soon.....well yes, there are potions you can take for birth control.” Pretty soon was right, the day before on the beach was a close call in that regard. Sophie hadn’t stopped Harry, Harry hadn’t stopped Sophie, it was kind of a mutual thing. Sophie had always known that she wouldn’t be pressured by Harry though, ever since their talk that first day when he revealed that he had never taken advantage, with girls, of his fame.

“That’s good to know honey, and again, I’m sorry for bringing it up like that. You’re a smart girl, with a good head on your shoulders, and I trust you to do the right thing.” Left unsaid what the right thing was, but Sophie assumed that it meant no sex.

“I will Mom, if you’re a grandma in the next couple of years, it won’t be because of me.” That didn’t mean no sex though. Ned and Jason both had casual girlfriends, but both were new relationships not as far along, time wise, as Sophie and Harry, but accidents could happen. They didn’t have Kiplinger’s Fail Safe Potion though, and Sophie did. This declaration seemed to satisfy Wendy, and to Sophie’s relief, she said no more about the topic.

“Have a safe trip home honey, through a fireplace. A fireplace.” She shook her head as she waved Jason and Ned back over. The Weirs all had a group hug, and Wendy surprised them by drawing Reiko into a hug as well, whispering to her:

“Thank you for being there for Sophie.” Reiko smiled into Wendy’s hair.

“It’s been my pleasure ma’am, she’s the best friend I could ever ask for.” They parted, and the boys shook hands with Reiko as well, saying much the same things out loud that Wendy had whispered. They had been reading about her for years, and it was interesting to finally put a face to the name, as Sophie hadn’t sent any pictures with her letters.

Sophie and Reiko waited until the others drove off, before making their way to the floo station. They strode quickly, as it was getting even colder outside. Reiko waited a block before she said anything.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine Reiko, it really couldn’t have gone any better.” No it couldn’t have, and no one was more relieved about that than Reiko, who had been having visions of fighting off paid goons with her wand, in case Mr. Wonderful decided to try and stamp some magic out. She shook it off though, and returned to the important part of the conversation.

“Just so we’re clear, we are NOT going to school here.” That wasn’t a question, but a statement.

“That was clear before we ever got here buddy girl. Sunshine is only 21 months away for us. No more blizzards after next year, I can hardly wait.”

“I’m sure we can convince the boys.”

“Harry can always floo to wherever he has Quidditch practice, and Warrick will be going with us.” Indeed Warrick had finally cracked an SAT study book the night before, after they returned from the island. Now it seemed that only Harry, of the gang, would not at least be looking into muggle university. He was no dummy, but the idea of sitting in a classroom for four more years when he didn’t have to did not warm his heart.

They reached the station in short order, and floored back to Warrick’s house. They found Warrick, Claudia, and Harry all eating spaghetti and chatting in front of the TV. Everyone looked over at them with questions on their faces.

“Well?”

“It went really well guys, it was such a great present Harry, you shouldn’t have gotten me anything else, it was worth so much to me.”

Harry felt an almost smug pride that his great gamble had paid off like it had, almost. He hugged her tightly, and was very happy that she was so happy.

“You look happy.”

“I am, this has been a great year, especially the last five months.”

“Let me grab you two something to drink.....you want some pasta?”

“Sounds good.”

“Sure, I’d love some. I’ll come with you.”

“No, I’ll grab it, you’d done enough today.” He smooched her loudly, and went off into the kitchen, where he quietly called for Dobby.

“So how did it really go?”

“It was fine Harry, nothing untoward happened.”

“They all got along?”

“Yes they did, though I did notice something funny.”

“What’s that?”

“Reiko used her wand to open a door, to the younger brother’s dormitory.”

“So?”

“The brothers looked very jealous Harry. None of the others saw it, but you could almost feel the envy.”

“I can’t say I blame them, kind like Mom and Petunia.” Dobby was nodding vigorously as though he could believe that, he could believe

anything badly of Petunia Dursley, though he would never admit as much to Harry, even in moments of extreme candor.

“If I may ask Harry, how did you own family adventure go?”

“It was very interesting Dobby, and most illuminating. When I show the others in the pensieve, I’ll make sure that you and Winky are there too.”

“Thank you Harry. I must say that becoming involved in your adventures has been most stimulating.”

“More than serving a Death Eater?”

“It is more calm, that is for certain.”

“Really?”

“Well, not by that much.” The two of them shared a look, and then burst out laughing, as they finished preparing the pasta for Reiko and Sophie. They walked into the living room, where Winky was already dealing the UNO cards. The New Year was only a few short days away, 1997 awaited.

End Chapter

Author's Note: No one has mentioned it in a review yet, but I'm figuring that most of you have cottoned on to the fact that Headmistress Joanne K. Murray is my tongue in cheek way of putting JK Rowling into my story, using her married name. I'm bringing this up now because we meet her husband and daughter in this chapter, and I'm messing with the real life timeline in a big way. In January 1997, when most of this chapter takes place, Jessica Rowling Arantes was three years old, not 14 as I have her here, and her real father is of course not Dr. Neil Murray, who was not yet married to JKR at that time, I'm not entirely sure that they had even met. Plus, I'm only vaguely describing her, because if you do a Google search for a photo of her, you come up empty handed, which on many levels I view as a good thing. She and Doctor Neil will likely be in future chapters as well, as recurring characters, so I wanted to include this disclaimer for you. One other thing: this isn't a travelogue, though I do keep sending the gang around the Midwest. This time it's Chicago, and please pardon me for the liberties I'm taking with the city and its businesses, as I've never been there.

Sunday, December 29, 1996

WWW

4:00 pm GMT

The shop, as a rule, was usually closed on Sundays. That policy was not in effect during this Christmas break from Hogwarts, the twins feeling that every galleon should be grasped for, so the shop was open noon-6:00 pm. Lee had no problem with it, since his job was basically just to ring up orders and explain things to the customers, not exactly heavy lifting to earn his generous salary. Though the customers did need a lot of things explained to them. Frequent examples included:

"This won't kill anybody will it?" Said fearfully.

"This will piss off Filch, won't it?" Said hopefully.

Parents and out of school siblings were usually the ones saying both, as while they certainly didn't want anyone to get hurt with the pranks, they had none too fond memories of the irritable Caretaker. Great Lakes was a little different however. Their caretaker, 32 year old Riley Poole, was just as crabby as Filch was, but he was more amenable to WWW mayhem. Harry had not entirely told the truth when he said to Steve Atwood that he was the seventh human employee of WWW.....Riley Poole had been, as Harry put him on the payroll early on in the term, in exchange for a hands-off position regarding the stuff the shop sold, and his own behavior in general. It had also paid dividends before Christmas, as Harry had asked Poole to keep an eye out for any Sophie mail, and to get it to her post-haste. For a salary of \$200 a month, Harry bought himself a little peace, and for less than he paid Dobby and Winky, whose 65 galleons a month translated into a little less than \$500 a month. Most of the gang didn't know about it, though the twins did, as Harry didn't want to encourage anything flagrant. He had told Sophie, who had reluctantly agreed to keep it private, agreeing that Warrick and Jonas would probably exploit the situation.

Neville and Luna had arrived a few minutes early, and were poking around the store when Harry emerged from the back, or at least right at the door. His friends' backs were turned away from him, and he didn't want to attract anyone else's attention, so he got creative. Aiming at Neville, he put very little force behind the spell:

“Repulsar”

He used his wand so that he could do it silently, and was rewarded when Neville flinched, like someone had poked him in the shoulder. He turned around and saw Harry motioning to come to the back. They did, and only once they were through the door did they say anything.

“Hey there mates.”

“Hello Harry, you look so tan.” And he did, between frolicking he and Sophie had gotten some sun, both the day after Christmas, and the

day before this, when it was just Harry and Sophie on the island for some relaxation, and a few other things.

“Island vacationing Luna, it has its advantages.” Luna was wearing the dress that Sophie had bought for her, and it looked hilarious. It looked good on her though, and she was wearing her butterbeer cap necklace, and some outlandish earrings. She looked around.

“Are your other friends here?”

“Not today, though they did want to meet you. We’ve all declared a quiet day kind of, where we’re just doing stuff on our own. We all spend a lot of time together, and sometimes it’s good to be apart.” They went to the back living area, where Fred and George were waiting with some food and drink. The five of them caught up on things for a little while, and then at Harry’s and the twins’ begging, a pensieve was fetched and Neville showed them the replay of his fight with Ron back in September. A sample highlight:

“What the hell are you doing to my things Ron?”

“Where’s the Marauder’s Map Neville! I know you have it, and I want it right now!”

“What the bloody hell are you talking about?”

“Give it over Neville, I deserve to have it if anyone here does. I won’t stop searching until I find it.” Ron resumed the ransacking, as Neville approached him.

WHAM! Right in the kisser, and Ron fell like he was poleaxed.

Harry and the twins watched the rest of the memory with vast amusement, though Neville hadn’t been present for Ron’s chewing out by McGonagall. Neville also treated them to the McGonagall Howler show, which had Harry smiling so wide his cheeks hurt the rest of the night. In return, they exhibited Ron’s aerial show after the snowball fight.

“So what’s he been like since then?” George made a face, but shrugged.

“We don’t really know Neville, we haven’t been back to The Burrow since then, and he hasn’t been here, though we wouldn’t kick him out if he tried to come in.”

“You didn’t have him or Ginny work here in the shop?” Fred shook his head.

“Nah, we’re taking a break from inventing, so we’re spending more time out front, helping Lee out. Ginny’s been going hard since beginning of term, so we wanted to give her a break, we just gave her some galleons for her Christmas present to make up for not working. Ron was not a consideration, even before his Christmas Day performance.” George suddenly had a thought.

“Would either of you like some summer work? Even if Ron behaves himself, we could still use some help around the shop during that time. Lee will want some time off I’m sure, and so will we for that matter. Merlin knows you two can be trusted not destroy anything.” Neville and Luna looked at each other blankly, neither had really considered something like that before.

“I could one or two days a week perhaps, I usually work with Daddy at The Quibbler the rest of the time.”

“I wouldn’t mind a shift or two, a chance to get out of the house a bit more. Professor Sprout and I have talked about doing some research this summer, but that wouldn’t be every day.”

“Terrific, you’re hired. We have six months to figure out your schedules, so no hurry. A lot will depend on the war, and on how much of a fool Ron’s being.”

“You really dislike him don’t you?” Fred closed his eyes.

“The problem with Ron, is that you don't know who you're getting from day to day, sometimes you get the good Ron, sometimes you get the bad one. At least Percy was consistent, and you could adjust accordingly to him. So in dealing with Ron, you have to be attuned to his moods, and there are a lot of times that it's just not worth it.” That summed things up so well, that George and Harry didn't feel the need to add anything.

The quintet chatted idly for awhile after that, avoiding the Ron subject. The twins left for a minute at 6:00, to help Lee close the shop up for the day.

“So just how did you get here Harry? If anyone used as many international portkeys as you've been doing, you'd be a candidate for St. Mungos right now.”

“I haven't come over that often, in public anyway. All right, you were going to find out about this when you went to the island anyway.” He proceeded to explain the trunk system to them, placing special emphasis on secrecy as always.

“You really do have things set up don't you? I think Dumbledore was right to be afraid of you.” Harry laughed, as Neville was smiling when he said it.

“Dumbledore is.....you know, I'm tired of thinking about Dumbledore. Just don't let the others know about the trunks either. As far as I'm concerned, the secret circle is closed now, with you two joining it.”

Neville couldn't help but marveled at how things had changed in just six months. Harry had all but cut Ron and Hermione out of his life, and most of it seemed to be because of Dumbledore, and Harry's hatred of the man. Neville reflected that Dumbledore had controlled Harry's life for over 15 years, and it was still ongoing, as Dumbledore was still forcing Harry into choices that he would have not made otherwise. He felt vastly sorry for Hermione, who was very steadfast for Harry, but was just watched too closely by Dumbledore for Harry's own peace of mind.

“What about after school? Will you start trusting them then?”

“That’s a long 18 months away Neville. I’m just going to focus on school for now. My grades have never been better, and we have Quidditch and the Olympics come Spring. It’ll be a good time.”

Luna then changed the direction of the discussion, as only she could.

“Now Harry, your new school is pretty far north right?”

“It is, very cold this time of year.”

“Now, have you checked the area for Crumple Horned Snorkaks?” This caught Harry off guard a little, and he exploded in laughter.

“Well no Luna, I haven’t. We’re technically not allowed off school grounds, though I do violate that from time to time.”

“ You should still go looking though, the Journal for Obscure Creatures would probably give you a feature article if you could find one, even more so if you get a photo.” Harry really regretted now that Luna had turned down the Great Lakes offer, he didn’t think listening to this kind of thing would ever get old.

“There’s only one problem.”

“What’s that Harry?”

“I don’t know what one looks like.”

“Well nobody knows Harry, silly boy. But I’ve read that you’ll know one when you see it. Daddy and I spent two weeks in Scandinavia in August, but we couldn’t find one. Maybe you’ll have better luck.”

“I’ll see what I can do Luna, you can count on me. I’ll give the photos to The Quibbler before any journal though, don’t worry.” Harry figured it would make for a fun field trip for the gang one Saturday.

“Daddy would be really thrilled.” Luna, in her letters to Harry, described the main stories for her father’s publication, and Harry made a point to have Dobby pick him up a copy of it afterward. It made for nice entertaining reading for the gang, kind of a cross between the muggle paper The National Enquirer and Mad Magazine.

“I hope so, I owe your father one. Have you two thought about when you might go to the island?” Neville answered him.

“We thought during the Easter break, so we could have more than a day. I think McGonagall would get suspicious if I just disappeared for much longer than that.”

“Does she keep a watch on you?”

“There are Listening Charms all over our room, though they might have been put there when you still lived there.” That didn’t surprise Harry in the slightest.

“Luna, are you monitored like that?”

“There is one in my room as well, but it’s in the middle of the room. There might be such charms in all the rooms for all I know Harry.”

“Well I don’t blame him there, if it’s in all of them.”

“There’s nothing to hear in our room, except for Seamus and Parvati doing their thing.”

“They do it with you in the room?”

“Every bloody night, and sometimes Dean or I have to provide the Silencing Charms when they forget to.”

“Not Ron?”

“I think he likes the show personally, I doubt he and Hermione are that active.” Harry had little trouble believing that. Hermione did not seem like that type, and even Ron was rather straitlaced in that regard.

“Rick and Terry, my other roommates don’t forget the Silencers thank goodness. Warrick goes to the basement, and I’ve resisted temptation to harass him so far.”

“How often do you use that Map Harry?”

“Not as often as we would like to Luna, Murray is kind of on to us so far about pranks and things.”

“She doesn’t mind?”

“As long as they amuse her, she’s cool with it.”

“Kind of like Dumbledore with the twins.” Harry didn’t see it that way, surprise surprise.

“Not really, he could be the grand old man, as long as he had McGonagall to do his dirty work. Heyman is kind of like that there, but he’s left us alone. Either he likes me, or Murray told him to lay off, I’m not sure.”

“Either way, it’s good for you.” Fred and George then came back with Lee, and the six of them shot the breeze for another hour before Neville and Luna took off. Harry and the twins went down to Frankenstein’s Workshop for a bit, as Fred and George showed him some of the things they were working on.

“That was a good idea, bringing them into the shop.”

“We thought it was something you might want, and since you never ask for much around here, it would be nice of us to try to anticipate things.” Harry looked at them with an exasperated expression.

“You guys are all heart.” They slapped him on the back and grinned.

“Well we’re assuming that Ron will go south on us, so it’s nice to have a backup plan.”

“At least you don’t have to worry about Hermione wanting a job, I thought she was going try and hex me the other day.” Fred started snickering.

“I offered her a job back in July, just to see what her reaction would be. She looked at me like I’d asked her to try out for the Chudley Cannons. I took that for a no and quickly ran in the other direction before she tried to hurt me.” That must have been something, Harry thought, very amused at the image. He was waiting for repercussions from Hermione for the Ron incident, though it was probably too soon to expect a letter from her under the best of circumstances, which these were not obviously. He was a bit sad that Hermione had so obviously chosen Ron over him, but he supposed that romantic love would always trump platonic affection.

Their meeting with Michael Steele had been set for Thursday, and they agreed to meet the night before to finalize their plans for it.

Thursday, January 2, 1997

Steele and Family Investments

12:50 pm

It had been a working lunch of sorts, as the three partners of WWW had sat in Michael Steele’s office and talked with him about the long-term plans for the business, all over deli food that had been brought in by Michael’s assistant/gofer/sandwich fetcher, who was not a Wizard and thus not allowed in the meeting. Fred and George were wary of the expense of putting up or leasing buildings in all five of the Alleys in the United States: Milwaukee, Boston, New York, Tulsa, and San Francisco, as well as people to staff them. Growing up in a Voldemort/Death Eater heavy society, the twins weren’t the most trusting people around.

“What it all boils down to guys, is that you don’t really need to expand right this minute, not with your level of turnover, and the fact that you two are the only manufacturers. That part is what I see as your most pressing need right now, especially with new sales coming in from Oklahoma. Could this Lee Jordan person be drafted into the manufacturing process?” The twins had considered this of course, but always dismissed it until now.

“He could, for the simpler jobs we suppose. We have talked about it with him, but he just doesn’t seem to have the aptitude for it. He’s no moron, don’t get me wrong, but it’s a special kind of thing to be able to make this stuff.” Harry had a thought.

“Could Dobby or Winky do it?” That gave them all a moment of pause.

“Winky maybe, but Dobby is just too excitable. She’s pretty calm though.....hmmmm.”

“The truth is Michael, we had always kind of just been hoping to slowly build until Ginny could be brought in, but the young fellow here has dragged us into moving faster.” Harry made a face at Fred.

“It’s not my fault your stuff is so damn popular.” Fred looked right back at him.

“Yes it is, you’ve promoted the heck out of it.”

“I never heard you complain when I sent all that money in.” Fred put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, George was being uncharacteristically quiet, for him.

“You didn’t, and we’re not now, don’t get me wrong. It’s just moving faster than we had thought. We know we should hire some more help, but let’s see what Winky is capable of first. Maybe we could get Dean involved in it on a very part-time basis, give him some piece work.” Ginny had enough on her plate what with OWL’s, Quidditch, Prefect duties, and the limited work she already did for the shop, that she

was stretched to her limits as it was. Dean had none of those responsibilities, and the twins wanted to reach out to him, acknowledging that they accepted his presence in Ginny's life.

Michael had heard all about these two from Jonas, and the hour long meeting had cemented his impression that these were three teenagers who had almost lucked into something potentially big, if handled just right. His businessman's mind was already doing some long-range planning for them, feeling that since he had an 'in' with Harry, that the account would be his very easily. The father in him just flat out liked the guys, and wanted to see them succeed.

"Have you thought about taking on another partner? Get an infusion of cash so you can expand?" The twins immediately shook their heads in the negative.

"No way, not anytime soon, if ever. We're just too much control freaks to deal with that. Junior here is the perfect partner, we do what we want and he eggs us on. That's why we didn't give Lee a piece of the business, we just want to run things ourselves."

"And the Zonko's rumors?"

"Let them stay rumors for all we care, we're not selling right now." Fred looked at the other two for agreement, and got it right away.

"For any price?"

"We'll listen to any offer, but it would take something outrageous to get us to sell." More nodding of the heads from Harry and George.

Just then, the intercom buzzed.

"Mr. Steele, your 1:00 appointment is here." Said appointment was a muggle pair, and Michael had asked that everyone be dressed in suits for the meeting, just so that the right impression was made. Harry just wore his Great Lakes uniform, which did not include robes, while Fred and George had indeed shown up presentable. They all stood up, and shook hands all around.

“Thanks for your time Michael, if nothing else you’ve got us thinking seriously about our future as a business.”

“Absolutely Michael, much appreciated. If we do take on another partner or investor, we’ll go through you to do it.” Michael smiled, mission accomplished. This would be a very good long-term association, especially when Jonas took over the business, as Michael knew he would someday. No hurry, as Michael himself was only three weeks past his birthday number 40.

“It was good to meet you guys, if you have any need for my services in the future, just let me know.” They nodded gratefully, and left the office, as Michael motioned for Harry to stick around.

“So you’re seeing Sophie’s family tomorrow?”

“All six of us are going this time, we’re meeting here in Chicago.”

“Be careful Harry, all of you. Make sure that the father isn’t having them followed.” That had certainly occurred to Harry, but it was intriguing coming from Michael.

“Do you know something I don’t Michael?” The older man shrugged, but he dealt with lawyers practically every day, and had a handle on how they operated.

“Probably not, having not met the man, while you have. But he’s a lawyer though, a high powered one to boot. I’m sure he has P.I.’s on the payroll or on retainer at his firm, and your visit had to make him wonder.”

“Thanks for the heads up. Reiko and I can use our wands if need be, and I’ll have Dobby and Winky following us too, just in case.”

“Jonas told me about that, a nice touch. Just be very careful what you do around muggles, the secret of our world is paramount.” He paused for a second.

“Sophie is a sweet and lovely girl, I’m glad that you look out for her like you do, with the parents and all. I had always hoped that my son might eventually go for her, but I don’t think he’s mature enough for someone like her quite yet.” That wasn’t said as criticism, but with a wry smile on his face, which made Harry chuckle.

“He just needs his own version of Sophie, that’s all. Anyway, I’m out of here. Will I see you at Easter?”

“You bet, I can’t wait to sample yours and Jonas’ menu. Ask the couple waiting out there to come in will you?”

“Sure thing Michael, take care.” They shook hands, and Harry walked to the waiting twins, as Michael’s next appointment went nervously into his office. Michael’s office did not have the floor fireplace in it, but rather it was in an anteroom that was always locked. That is, unless you could use Alohomora to open it. Fred did so, and the three of them flooded back to Warrick’s house. Warrick and Reiko were at the movies, while the other three were over at the Steele house doing something on the internet there.

“Harry, before we go back to the shop, there’s something we’d like to talk to you about.”

“What is it?” The twins looked at each other, and George took over.

“We would like to take you up on your Great Lakes offer.” Harry had rarely been more surprised lately, and that was saying something.

“Come again?”

“We figured it out, we each have 10 more weeks of schooling to go, plus NEWT’s, and we would like to do it at Great Lakes. If the offer was meant to include us, that is.” Harry was still shaking his head.

“Wow, words literally fail me. You two want to become students again.”

“Don’t let your jaw hang too open there Harry, flies will get in.”

“Yeah, it was Dad’s idea really, after telling us that Ginny wouldn’t be going. Actually, it was on the day you sent that Howler to Mum. That was a big day. We’ve been thinking about it off and on, and we’ve decided to go for it.” Harry had now recovered sufficiently to say something constructive.

“Well of course the offer includes you two, it just never occurred to me that it was something you would be interested in.”

“Well we would like to say that we are proper graduates, might mean something down the line with investors like Michael and his ilk.” Yes it would, and it made far more sense for Harry after talking with Jonas’ dad than it would have beforehand.

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yes we are, right Fred?”

“Right George. If this Murray woman says it’s okay, we’ll be there come April, with bells on.” Harry made a snap decision.

“Well there’s no time like the present.” He walked over to the floo and flung some powder into it.

“Headmistress Joanne Murray!” After a few seconds, a male face appeared in the floo.

“Yes?”

“Dr. Murray?” Harry had met the man a couple of times, a friendly sort of fellow who was a doctor at the hospital in Marquette, the nearest one to Great Lakes. From the rumors he had heard, the Doc was not much of a Wizard, power-wise, which is why he had chosen to go into medicine. Wanting to build his career on his own, he had eschewed the Doctor’s job here at Great Lakes, though he was

available in a pinch, in theory.....one that had never been put to the test of course, as the gig was more a sinecure than anything..

“Oh hello Harry, Joanne stepped out for a moment, she’ll be right back. Something I can help you with?”

“I was wondering if a couple of my British friends and I might drop by for a few minutes, there’s some stuff I was hoping to talk with Professor Murray about.” Stuff meant plural, and the twins eyed Harry, wondering what else he had cooking.

“Sure thing, come on over.”

The three of them, one by one of course, hopped in the floo, and soon were there. They popped out in Murray’s office, which like the ones belonging to Karl and Lisa at Tecumseh, adjoined her living quarters. Neil Murray greeted them easily, as Harry vividly recalled his first night in here, right after his long plane ride. He had been back a few times, with the vampires and with Tonks and Bones most notably, but he always had a visceral reaction to this office, because of that night.

“Thanks Dr. Murray. How was your Christmas?”

“Very quiet, only about 20 or so students stuck around, so we had the run of the place. Yours?”

“The day itself was rather eventful, but before and after were all very relaxing. Oh, I’m sorry, where are my manners. Dr. Murray, meet Fred and George Weasley, my close friends and partners.” The three men shook hands warmly, the twins had been doing nothing but looking around the office as well.

“Partners? As in that joke shop I keep hearing about?”

“Yes sir, Harry gave us the start-up capital.....well a couple of years ago now, and we’ve been going ever since.”

“Our daughter Jessica will want to get some of your stuff to take back with her, my wife can’t stop laughing when she describes it.”

“No I can’t, it’s always good for a chuckle.” The lady herself had just walked into the office, followed by a teenage girl that Harry could only assume was the daughter, the much speculated on Jessica, who was in her fourth year at Salem. Harry introduced Fred and George to the new arrivals, and was introduced himself to Jessica Murray, a quiet type it seemed, though she had a friendly smile.

“Good to meet you both, I’ve heard much about you, and witnessed your inventions. What brings you by? Have you moved back into your dorm room already Harry?”

“No ma’am, that’s probably going to be Sunday morning. We were hoping for a word or two with you, if you don’t mind.” Murray was very curious now, and motioned for the Brits to follow her into the living room.

“This is nothing secret or anything, so nobody has to leave or anything.” Even more curiosity from Murray, as they all sat down on the couches, Brits on one, Murrays on the other.

“So what’s on your mind Harry?” He was unsure of how to start, so he decided to quickly get to the point and let the fallout happen afterward.

“Ma’am, do you remember back in the med station, when I told you that I had offered to pay the fees of any of my Hogwarts friends who wanted to come over here?” Murray looked from Harry to the twins, immediately figuring it out, but not believing it.

“I do remember, and you said that you would get back to me if any of them took you up on it.”

“Yes ma’am I did. Fred and George here told me a few minutes ago that they would like to do so.”

“Yes ma’am, if you give the go ahead, George and I would like to finish our schooling here.” Murray couldn’t help but smile.

“How much schooling do you have to finish? Professor Hill wrote me about your exit strategy from Hogwarts, very creative.”

“Ah Professor Hill, we didn’t really pay attention too much in class, but he’s a grand fellow.”

“Yeah, you see our father is muggle obsessed, so we didn’t have much choice really but to take Hill’s class. Ron and Ginny are the only ones not to take it, and they both had to do some de-noming in retribution.”

“Bill didn’t George, he did Runes and Arithmancy remember.”

“Oh yeah. Now ma’am, if we’re getting the dates right, you had our brother Percy during your year there, he would have been second year.”

“I do remember, very proper type of young man.” Just then she remembered that Percy was no longer with them.

“I was sorry to hear about his loss. He died a hero.”

“Thank you ma’am.”

“Thank you Professor.”

“That brings us back to how much time you have left in school.” George looked a little abashed.

“Oh right, sorry bout that. We figure its about 10 weeks or so, plus NEWTs, and we would be prepared to take them.” This astonished her, as everything she had heard about them seemed to point in the other direction, they certainly were going the extra mile in trying to persuade her.

“We should probably add, since you speak with Professor Hill and all, we do remember Harry mentioning that now that I think on it.....well, we will take this seriously, if you allow us in. I mean we’ll still be ourselves and all, but we won’t disrupt class or make a mess of the hallways or anything like that.” George was nodding in agreement.

“What he’s saying ma’am, is we will do our best to make sure that you don’t look bad for letting us in, or make it a waste of your time. The youngster here will keep us in line as well I’m sure.” Harry rolled his eyes theatrically.

“Oh like you’ll do anything I tell you.”

“Well your influence then, osmosis and all that.”

Murray sat there considering this for a minute. She had wondered before at becoming a halfway house for Hogwarts exiles, after Harry had told her about the offer, but this was different. She knew that there was no real harm in it, and the twins were hugely popular in absentia anyway because of WWW. She looked at Harry for a moment, and decided to confirm a suspicion.

“All right Fred, George. I have one question for you, and I need an honest answer.”

“Of course ma’am.”

“Fire away.”

“Now I’ll preface this by saying that no one will get in trouble, no matter how you answer. Honesty is the important thing here.”

“Go ahead, ask away.”

“Have either or both of you ever been in this school before today?”
Wham!

To their credit, Fred and George didn't hesitate, or even look at Harry as they answered.

"No ma'am we have not." Said simultaneously. Harry had told them numerous times of his suspicions that she knew of the trunk, or at least the idea of the trunk and a getaway. So it was that they were both prepared to answer this kind of question. The trunk secret remained paramount, and the twins had little trouble lying to their own mother if it suited the situation, so this stranger deserved no better.

"Fair enough. Harry, outside of that trial and Flackter Alley, have you ever left school grounds?"

"No ma'am, I have not. Well okay, I did once last summer to see Warrick play soccer, but that's it." Harry had never lied to Murray in the short time he had known her, but there was no hesitation on his part either, and afterward he thought his truth about the soccer game played pretty well overall.

"All right then. Am I right in assuming that your grades aren't stellar?"

"Yes ma'am. We'll get you copies as soon as we get back home. Peter Tyson's wife works in the Ministry Records Office, he has already told us that she'll get us our files if we need it. And for the record, we have been officially told that our official Hogwarts status is 'dropped out', rather than expelled." They clearly had been thinking about this for some time now, Harry thought, not a little impressed. He had been afraid it was just a whim after seeing Michael. Murray decided to see just how prepared they were.

"What classes would you want to take?"

"We can pick five or six, right?"

"You can."

"See Harry, we do pay attention when you tell us things. For instance ma'am, he explained the Advanced and Regular concept to

us, and we would be eligible for Advanced Charms, as that's what we get our O's in. I know, we could hardly believe it either. We would also want to take Potions, Muggle Studies, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Herbology." Not a bad curriculum, thought Murray, who like Harry was impressed that they had planned this out.

"What about your business?" George answered her.

"We can do that here ma'am, and have Dobby and Winky deliver the stuff back to the home store in Diagon Alley. We'll just place a moratorium on inventing and simply do the necessary manufacturing. There aren't that many customers to the shop when school is in session, so Lee Jordan, our friend and employee, can handle that part of it. Our parents have also volunteered to help out if need be, they're fully behind us in this."

"Harry, you're prepared to pick up their fees? I would say off the top of my head that 10 weeks for each of them would equal about what half of what you pay." Not being citizens of the U.S., the three Brits had, and would have, to pay tuition and room and board, just like at Hogwarts, though fees there were more or less on a need basis, with poor families, such as the Weasleys, paying less than the Malfoys, or even Harry himself in past years.

"Yes ma'am."

"Okay, I don't see why you shouldn't be allowed to finish up here. The Harry experiment has certainly worked out excellently. I won't even ask for a bribe of some free pranks for Jessica here." Said with a grin, as Fred and George looked both delighted and relieved. Harry leaned forward however.

"Funny you should mention that Professor Murray, I was going to send you an owl Jessica, but this works out much better." Everyone stared at him blankly, except for Jessica herself, who was a little red in the face.

"Really? What for?"

“I was hoping you might be interested in a little extra pocket money. You see, last week the guys and I hired a Transition student named Steve Atwood to be our point person at Tecumseh, I met him at Thanksgiving and Reiko and the others have known him for a few years now. I was trying to think of ways we could do this for the other two schools, and you are the only Salem student I have ever even heard of.”

“You want me to sell your stuff at school?”

“Well it doesn’t even really have to be sold exactly, I’ve found that here at Great Lakes, the products just kind of sell themselves, and I collect the money and have Dobby and Winky do the deliveries.” The girl looked confused.

“Who are Dobby and Winky?”

“Oh, they’re my two house elves, my staff as I like to call them. Dobby! Winky!” The two of them popped in, and were now wearing Indiana Pacers jerseys, kid’s size ones of the like that Harry had gotten for Christmas. So much for their loyalty to the Milwaukee Bucks, whose jerseys they had sported as recently as last week.

“You two are fair weather fans, you know that don’t you?”

“In point of fact we do Harry.”

“Guys, meet Dr. Murray and Jessica Murray.” Dobby and Winky smiled pleasantly at the two strangers, and at Professor Murray, who they had already won over.

“They work for both WWW and myself, and since they can just pop back and forth across the pond, they’re ideal for this kind of thing.”

“What would I have to do?” Harry gave her the two minute spiel, which does not need to be repeated here, as it does not differ at all from what he told Steve Atwood.

“Okay, I have to admit that I’m interested. Just out of curiosity, what do you plan to do for Pathfinder?” Harry hesitated, rather at a loss, and Professor Murray jumped into the breach with some advice.

“You know, Professor Lyman went to Pathfinder, I would imagine that he has some nieces or nephews who go there.” Murray had taken notice of the Sunday breakfast shows that Harry and Lyman had put on, and had even suspected Lyman of being a WWW customer himself, not that there was anything wrong with that. She didn’t know about Riley Poole though, fortunately for Harry, as she would likely take a dim view of bribery, even as benign a bribery as it was here.

“That’s not a half bad idea, Professor Lyman.....hmmmm.....” Indeed it hadn’t occurred to him, but he would make a point of talking about it with him when he got back on Sunday, as he was pretty sure that Lyman himself was traveling during the break.

“So what do you think Jessica? We don’t need to know right now of course, take all the time you need.” She was quiet for a moment.

“Mom? Dad? Any objections?” Her dad responded first.

“I have no problem with it, it would be a good way to earn some extra money. And your new bosses appear to be reputable.” That earned a collective chuckle.

“I don’t see any reason why not, unless Headmaster Shupe would have a problem with it. He’s got a sense of humor though, and I’ll talk to him about it if there is a problem.” Beau Shupe was the 47 year old Headmaster of Salem, and a former colleague of Murray’s from the American Auror Command, though it was purely a coincidence that two former Aurors were both Heads of their schools. Though they had never worked directly with each other in Auror Command, Murray and Shupe got along rather well, and better than either did with the Heads of both Pathfinder and Tecumseh, who were a former Muggle Studies teacher and Arithmancy teacher respectively.

“All right, I’ll give it a try then.” The three Brits rose and went over to shake her hand.

“Terrific, glad to have you on the team. We’ll have a set of catalogs, posters, and a demonstration kit delivered to you before you leave for school.....which is when by the way?”

“Saturday afternoon sometime, at least that’s the plan for now.”

“Good, that’s plenty of time. Dobby or Winky here will be back tomorrow afternoon with a care package for you. Harry here has to meet mother Weir, but we’ll take care of it.”

“Great, this sounds cool now that I think more about it. My friends should love this stuff.”

“We’re told that all Americans aren’t necessarily alike, but the students here love the stuff, so you shouldn’t have a problem. There’s no quota for you to sell, since we have no other options at your school, but do your best and we’ll be satisfied with that, no questions asked.” Jessica had heard all about Harry before this, even before her mother took him into the school, but it was kind of strange to be up close to the famous Harry Potter, and being hired by him a few minutes later no less.

“I should send you an owl if I have any questions?”

“Sure, and I’ll have Dobby or Winky bring back my reply, so it will be quicker. My owl is usually on the Michigan/Oklahoma run, in fact I can’t remember the last time she delivered a letter for me.” The twins scratched their heads.

“Sometime in July wasn’t it? Before the big move.”

“Something like that, yeah. I still visit her a few times a week, to let her know I haven’t forgotten her. My first pet.”

“The piranha you got certainly are a contrast.” Harry had stocked his aquarium on New Year’s Eve, and for once behaved totally like a teenage boy. He hadn’t yet given them any live prey, but was thinking about it for the future.

“Cliché I know, but I like the idea. I got myself an aquarium for Christmas, I bought one for some friends of mine back in Britain, and snagged one for myself at the same time.”

The six of them chatted for a few more minutes, before Fred and George volunteered to show the Americans a portable swamp, up close and personal. The group trooped outside, and after Dobby fetched a swamp, the twins deployed it right in front of the school. Jessica was fascinated, and mentally patted herself on the back for saying yes to the job. As she walked around the now arctic swamp:

“I don’t think Professor Shupe would want one of these used inside the building.”

“Well the only time I have is during the first day of Basic Combat. It certainly shocked the crap out of Drew. Professor Ripley told me later that the elves looked at getting rid of it as a challenge.” George looked at Harry.

“We never found out, how long did it take them to get rid of ours at Hogwarts?”

“Flitwick left it there until the hag was ousted, then a flick of the wand later, poof.”

“He’s the one we miss the most there, but it’ll be fine here.” Indeed, Harry had told them about how attractive Professor Maloney was. Girlfriends or not, Fred and George were looking forward to the contrast from the Hogwarts professors.

The twins were prevailed upon to do a few more demonstrations for the Americans, after which they took their leave, flooing back to Warrick’s house. Before they left, they solidified their plans with Professor Murray.

“I’ll send you your official acceptance letters as soon as I get copies of your Hogwarts files. Figure on showing up the second Saturday in April, that will give you a couple of days to acclimate yourselves before you begin classes.”

“What about a sorting, will you be wanting to do that for them?” She considered it for a moment.

“That depends, if you two plan to compete in the Olympics and Quidditch, then yes there probably will be one. If not, then I can slot you right into Cortez, which I’m assuming you would want.”

“Well, that’s a good question, see why we have this guy as our mate? Um.....well I’m probably for doing a sorting myself, just in case. I would love the chance to play Quidditch with Harry again, wouldn’t you Fred?”

“You bet. We wouldn’t take Warrick’s spot though, and Harry tells us that the team Captain is a Beater too.....so we would probably have to play Chaser.” That was an interesting idea.

“Good idea, other than Reiko they could use some more practice before getting in a game again.” Murray was half tempted to put them in Cortez just to see that, but knew that the others Houses would go crazy just at the suggestion of it.

“Fair enough, and in consideration, I’ll only put one of you in the chair, so you both can go into the same House.”

“Thank you ma’am, that’s very considerate of you.” The twins were being very polite and mannered today, and Harry had not really been sure that they could pull it off, not only with Murray but with Michael as well. He knew they would make a good impression, but running their own business had matured them it seemed. One last thing from Murray.

“Harry, did I hear Fred....or was it George, anyway, what did he mean about ‘mother Weir?’”

“The day after we left for break, Warrick and I paid a visit to the Weirs, to try and effect a reconciliation. You know that the brothers have been writing her all this time?”

“So I’ve been told, yes.”

“Well the mother is now on our side, and the father, well he is a squib, that’s why he kicked her out. Jealousy reared its ugly head I guess.” Murray looked contemplative.

“A squib eh? That would explain quite a lot. I know that the brothers aren’t magical, when former Headmaster Rydell left he told me about Sophie’s situation, and I made a point of checking into it. The father was bitter about it? Please tell me you didn’t threaten him.” Harry was more than a bit tired of getting that question, and it showed a little in his tone of voice.

“Why does everyone assume that I would threaten him?”

“Because of your feelings for Sophie, and the fact that Mr. Weir was not likely to treat you with much politeness, given the past history.”

“He was civil enough, and no I did not threaten him. Though I would have loved to beat him within an inch of his life.” Harry was not smiling when he said this.

“I can understand that feeling, you’re a very direct person Harry, and I can sympathize with that given your recent history back over there. I can only imagine what you would think if you ever meet Claudia’s family.”

“Why is that?” Murray didn’t respond verbally, she just touched the side of her nose and sniffed a few times, and Harry got the message.

“So that’s why they were Obliviated, that makes sense.” Claudia seldom talked about her parents, she told Harry that there was no point really, and he had not known about their chemical issues. She

still loved them, but their addictions had rendered them all but useless, both to her and themselves. It was a blessing that their only child had proven to be magical, and thus able to go to an expensive boarding school, all paid for the government.

Once back at Forrester House, the three of them found that the place was still empty, as they had only been gone about 45 minutes on their trip to school. Fred and George stuck around for awhile, as they watched some TV and talked over some more WWW strategy. This was not the twins' first visit to a muggle house, or a muggle style house anyway, but they did do some exploring, and found that the house was much like The Burrow, just a bit smaller in some places, larger in others. There were only four bedrooms and three baths, so that was smaller. The rooms were bigger though, as Nick made a nice living with his wands, and they could afford such a large place, even though there were just the three of them at most, two of them usually.

Eventually Martin and Karen returned home, and were interested to meet the twins, who were invited to stay for dinner. Warrick and Reiko arrived right before the food was served, and Fred and George entertained everyone with Harry stories, which always made him grimace. That was the point though, and the twins had a fun time taking the piss out of him. Nick, still nursing his wounds after how badly he had lost the Christmas bet, egged them on, and dinner lasted long enough for Jonas, Sophie, and Claudia to stop by for dessert. They shared the results of their day, and everyone was a little agog at the idea of Fred and George joining them at school, even if only for a couple of months. The twins left after dessert, it had been a long day for them, as they had been up to open the shop. It was a big day tomorrow, and everyone hit the sack pretty early.

Friday, January 3, 1997

Chicago, Illinois

10:00 am EDT

The plan had been hashed out over the phone on Monday between Sophie and her mother. The plan was to meet in Chicago, a not

unsubstantial 200 miles drive for the muggles, but it was Wendy Weir's idea and the magical folk saw no reason to argue, if they wanted to spend six hours in the car roundtrip, that was their lookout. Everyone met at the Steele house, and then flooded to the nearest Greyhound Station to where they were going to meet. The meet was to be in the lobby of the Sears Tower, a touristy place that was easily findable for both muggle and magical alike. The floo station was only about a mile from the Tower, and the gang made the walk through the snow packed sidewalks in a little over 20 minutes. The area was so filled with cars that neither Sophie nor Reiko bothered to try and find Wendy's car.

They walked through the huge doors into the lobby, and found that they had gotten there first. Wendy Weir had taken numerous classes on field trips to the Tower over the years, and had suggested the spot where they were to meet. The six of them milled around aimlessly, with Harry doing the most looking around, as he had been the only one of them not to have been here before.

After about ten minutes, Sophie started to get worried, as her family still hadn't gotten there. Against her better judgment, she had given her mother Warrick's phone number, just in case, figuring that her parents might now have Caller ID and have the number anyway. There had been no call to the Forresters, and Wendy Weir did have a cell phone, so if there had been a breakdown on the road she could notify them.

"Should we call them?" Claudia patted her on the arm.

"Relax Sophie, it's snowing pretty steadily out there, its probably just taking them longer to make the drive. If you call, you'll just get the answering machine." Or find out that they're not coming at all, everyone thought, but none of them said out loud. Sophie didn't have her mother's cell number, not thinking she would need it. There weren't phones at Great Lakes anyway, so it wouldn't do her any good beyond this vacation.

"That makes sense, it's been so long since I've been in a car that I forgot about that." In fact her ride with former Headmaster Rydell had

been her most recent auto trip, in June 1992, as the girls walked during the few trips they made in muggle Milwaukee and muggle Tulsa. Meanwhile Harry had slipped off and had was exploring. One of the things they had talked about was going to the top of the building, and he was checking his camera as he wandered. Not paying attention, he had meandered toward a set of doors, and was startled when he almost ran into Wendy, Ned, and Jason Weir.

“Oh hello, sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Hello Harry, its nice to see you again.”

“You too Mrs. Weir. Ned, Jason.” He shook hands with the brothers, Dobby’s words about the envy filling the front of his mind, though he didn’t let it show.

“Good to see you again Harry.”

“Likewise guys. Glad you could make it, we were getting a little worried, with the weather out there and all.”

“The roads in Springfield were pretty bad, but once we got out onto the freeway it got a lot better. Where are the others?”

“At the meeting point, I’ll show you.” He led the three muggles toward the rest of the gang. Sophie’s face lit up when she saw them, and she walked over and hugged her mother.

“Hi mom, boys.” She stuck her tongue out at Ned and Jason.

“Ha ha my very little sister.” And she was, Ned and Jason were both over six feet tall, while Sophie had just about finished growing to make 5’4”.

“We were getting worried.”

“So Harry said, it was just a little hard to get out of Springfield is all.”

“Mom, Ned, Jason this is Claudia Cregg and Jonas Steele. You’ve met Warrick and Reiko, and Harry of course.” She pointed out each of the brothers, who strongly resembled each other, far more than any of the non-twin Weasleys did.

“Pleased to meet you all, we’ve heard a lot about you.” Claudia managed this with a straight face, though she was probably the most militant of the gang in their attitudes towards Wendy.

“Same here, good to meet you.” From Jonas, with a neutral tone of voice.

“It’s good to meet you both, we’ve read a lot about you in Sophie’s letters.” Then a few seconds of silence ensued, as everyone seemed to be waiting for someone else to speak. Harry decided to throw a pence in.

“How bout we go to the top like we talked about?” Everyone agreed that it was a good idea, and they went off to find an empty elevator for the nine of them, which they got after a short wait. It was a long ride to the top, and Harry, typical of his muggle experiences as a kid, had not been in too many elevators, and found it to be a little off-putting, the sensation. They reached the top of the building, and found that it was quite cold, though the snow was falling only intermittently. Sophie, Reiko, and Claudia were huddled with Wendy as they moved off to one of the sides, as there were only about ten other people up there at this time. That left the brothers, looking a bit nervous, to talk with Harry, Jonas, and Warrick. They gave the women their space, and moved to the other side of the observation platform. Harry started with a softball question, before getting to what he really wanted to know.

“So when do you guys go back to school?”

“Probably tomorrow, that’s when we can move back into our dorms. How bout you guys?”

“We’re thinking Sunday, there’s one other thing we have to do tomorrow.” That was a trip to the island, as Harry had more or less

abandoned the idea of going there on the weekends, not wanting to have to explain any tans by the gang. Even though he had long assumed her suspicions, the questions by Murray the day before had rocked him a little, and he had resolved to be much more careful about leaving school in the future.

“We’ll have to get you out to one our schools during your spring break, I’m sure its different than your boarding school.” Which is how Jason tried to think of Great Lakes.

“Jason, Ned, I know it must have been hard on you, seeing Reiko use magic last week.” The two looked at each other, how did he know that? Jason took the lead, as usual.

“I was wondering if you were following us.” Harry looked straight at him.

“Why would I follow you?”

“Because of Dad, you would want to make sure nothing happened to Sophie. I suppose you guys have ways of being invisible.”

“We do, but no, I wasn’t there that day. I had my house elves follow you, for the reason that you said. I’m worried about your father and his hostility. Have you noticed any change in him since last week?” That got their attention so much that they didn’t even ask what a house elf was.

“No, and I’ve been looking. He’s a trial lawyer though Harry, he’s tough to read by definition.” Jonas, while interested in the byplay, decided that his scenario needed to be brought into the open.

“Is it possible that he might try to take Sophie out of school by force?” Ned and Jason both looked like that idea had indeed occurred to them.

“No, I honestly don’t think he could do that. I agree its plausible on the surface, but our dad has never even smacked any of us, I can’t

see him orchestrating a snatch.” Ned didn’t say anything for a second, but what he asked next surprised his brother.

“Look, if he tries something today, you guys can protect her, right? I mean Sophie told us that you have to be 17 to use your sticks, and some of you can, right?”

“Reiko and I can, and I have a backup plan in place as well.” Named Dobby and Winky.

“You really think he would do that Ned?”

“I don’t know Jason, I don’t know how deep his bitterness goes, do you? I’m not worried so much about Sophie as I am about Mom.” The Weir marriage was considered a ‘traditional’ type of relationship, with a domineering father and loving mother, though Peter was not violent at all.

“She can handle him, don’t worry about that Ned.”

“Like she did with Sophie? She let him do that to her.” The three magicals, all only children, stood there more than a little uncomfortable, as they listened to the brothers hash this out in front of them.

“This is different Ned.” How different, he wasn’t able to explain just then, as the others came over.”

“What are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing important sis, just getting to know each other a little better. It’s freezing out here, can we safely say that we enjoyed the view?” Harry had turned to take a couple of pictures, and for a second had a dreamy look on his face. Sophie saw it, and poked him in the arm.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I’m thinking about a Wronski Feint from the top of this building, just me, my broom, and the rush of a power dive.” Indeed, he was half tempted to have Dobby go get his broom, secrecy be damned.

“I think the government would be a little displeased with that idea.”

“Governments are not about fun Sophie.” He took one more photo, and they joined the others near the elevators. Once in the lobby, talk turned to where to go next.

“Did you folks eat before you came up here? We could get a late breakfast or an early lunch somewhere?”

“Good idea Jonas, didn’t Sophie mention that you’re from Chicago? Why don’t you pick a place.” Jonas needed no further encouragement, and decided that they should all go to his favorite Italian restaurant, which was only about two miles away. A bit far to walk, but they caught a couple of cabs, which got them there just before the lunch rush ten minutes later. The manager was an acquaintance of Michael Steele, and they got a nice, large table in the corner. Talk soon turned to comparing regular muggle high school with Great Lakes, and even Ned and Jason soon loosened up about things, and traded some anecdotes. The lunch took two hours, and everyone was slowly getting used to each other. Just before dessert, Harry excused himself and motioned for Jonas and Warrick to come with him to the bathroom. They entered the thankfully empty room, and Harry called out quietly for Dobby, who popped in, looking relieved that Harry had finally called for him.

“Yes Harry?”

“Are we being tailed?”

“I am not sure Harry, there are two men in dark grey business suits here that were also in the tall building, but I do not know if it is connected to you and your friends.”

“How soon after we got here did they arrive?”

“About three minutes, they walked in just as you were being seated. There are at a table roughly five meters away from you. They do not appear to be trying to listen in to your conversations.”

“Are you sure that it is just those two?”

“I do not know Jonas, there could be more in the parking area.”

“Check it out Dobby, see if there’s anyone waiting in a car.” Dobby nodded, and then when it seemed that there were no further instructions, popped away.

“Maybe we’re just being paranoid here Harry, this is a popular place. It could just be a coincidence.”

“Could be Warrick, but let’s make sure. Winky.” She popped in.

“Winky, I want you to keep an eye on the men Dobby told us about. If they use a cell phone, lift it after they’re done talking and put it in my pocket. Got it?” She nodded, and went off.

“What would that prove?”

“We’ll check the numbers and see if they’ve called Papa Weir. One of the brothers will know his office and cell numbers. I wonder if a cell phone would work at school? We should find that out, be handy to have around.” Harry was getting a headache with all this plotting, but he had a bad feeling about how this was going, and did a few seconds of Occlumency exercises to calm his nerves.

“C’mon you two, the others will be wondering what we’re doing in here.” They washed their hands and took off back to the table. Harry spotted the men Dobby had told them about, and fortunately his place at the table allowed him to keep them somewhat in view.

Dessert was served, and they all shared a few pieces of tiramisu, and Harry and Sophie were both reminded that their first date had been

an Italian restaurant, where the dessert was the same as today. She turned to him.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Mario’s on a warm August day?” That was the restaurant in Milwaukee.

“You betcha Mister.” They squeezed hands.

“We’ll go there on our next Flackter trip. Just the two of us.” They had whispered all of this, and the others pretended not to notice. When dessert was almost over, Harry felt a tugging on his shirt. He looked down and didn’t see anyone, so he assumed it was Winky. He reached into his coat pocket and felt around, sure enough, a cell phone was in there now. He waited until the check was paid, at Jonas’ insistence he picked it up, and motioned Jason to hang back as they left the restaurant, deciding on a walk to a nearby bookstore. They let the others get about 10 feet ahead of them before Jason started talking.

“What’s up?”

“Can you figure out this phone?” The only time he had ever used one was right after Thanksgiving at the Forresters’, when Michael had shown him his, and Harry had called a sports line just for the hell of it, though Michael had explained how to use one.

“Sure, I didn’t know you had one of these, it’s a nice one.” If only it was that simple.

“It’s not mine, it belongs to one of the men who may or may not be following us. Check the numbers called and received and see if you recognize any of them.

“Oh my God, are you serious? Wait a minute, you said something earlier about house elves, is that who you have shadowing us? Is that how you got this?”

“They’re very good, very effective, and 100 percent loyal to me. Surely Sophie must have written you about house elves.” Jason inwardly swore at this kid expecting him to remember every detail from 50 letters written by his teenage sister, but forgot that when something hit him.

“Is one of them named Dobby? She mentioned a Dobby, but I can’t remember if it was a friend or something else.”

“He works for me, or I work for him, it seems to fluctuate. Now check out those numbers before the others figure out what we’re doing.” Jason pushed some buttons on the phone and groaned when he saw the list scroll down.

“Oh shit. My dad’s cell phone number is on here, and one that I think is to his office. I haven’t called that one in a few years, so I’m not sure. It’s a Springfield prefix, I can tell you that much.”

“You know Ned and your mother, should we tell them right away or wait for a quiet spot.”

“This is one of the largest cities in the world Harry, where would a quiet spot be?”

“Mate, I have no way of knowing. This is your territory, not mine.”

“Just keep that stick ready, we’ll be fine once we get to the bookstore.” That was another 10 minutes of walking, as the two of them walked quickly to catch up. Warrick and Jonas turned to look at Harry, who just nodded at them, communicating his message. Warrick was walking next to Reiko as it happened, and his arm was already around her shoulders. He leaned way down and whispered into her ear.

“Make sure you have one hand on your wand baby, we’re being followed.” Reiko somehow kept her surprise in check, and did as he asked without comment or question. They reached the store, and Harry herded them all into the coffee area first, which Sophie immediately found suspicious, as Harry loathed coffee.

“What’s going on Harry?”

“At least two people in contact with your father are following us.” Wendy Weir quickly went pale.

“How do you know this?” Harry handed her the cell phone.

“Check the numbers Mrs. Weir.” She did, and went even more white, and this was a lady who was pale to begin with.

“How did you get this?” Enough with the stupid questions, Harry raged inside. What he wouldn’t give to have Fred and George standing next to him right now. They wouldn’t be asking useless questions.

“Magic. Now the question is, what to do about it.”

“Can’t you take care of them? Using your magic I mean.”

“That is an option, yes. Jason, those numbers were called recently?”

“Yeah, since we hooked up with you guys this morning.”

“Let’s huddle up a second, make a circle.” Confused, the muggles did as he asked, though the others recognized a magic hiding circle when they saw one. Once it was done:

“Dobby.” The little fellow popped in, nearly giving Wendy Weir and her two sons a collective stroke. Harry ignored this though:

“Are they in here?”

“Yes Harry, they are in the sports section of the store, and your group huddle is making them suspicious.” Well that was just too damn bad.

“Is it just the two of them?”

“So far as Winky and I can tell.”

“Well we have two options here: One, we can take care of them ourselves; Two, we can send for Drew’s father, he’ll be able to take care of them officially.”

“What do you mean ‘take care of’? You’ll kill them?” That was an option of course, but Harry was not quite so ruthless as to do that to people not trying to kill him first.

“I mean having their memories modified Ned. But if they make one false move, I’ll make them wish they’d never been born. And then I’ll visit your dad.” The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees with that statement. Sophie took advantage of the silence, and looked at Dobby.

“Dobby, please go get Drew’s dad, Mitchell Baylor. He’s at the Auror Headquarters in Flackter Alley.” Dobby looked at Harry, he wasn’t going to do anything here without Harry’s express permission.....he knew where his rice bowl was.

“Go ahead Dobby, please hurry. Bring him right back here.”

“Yes Harry.” He went off, and the huddle broke.

“Let’s split up until Mr. Baylor gets here.” They were just starting to break apart, when the man himself came striding quickly out of the bathroom area, followed by three other people that Harry assumed were his subordinates. They came up to the group, and Mitchell shook Harry’s hand.

“Harry, good to see you again. I understand you have some more spies for me to deal with.” Harry introduced Mitchell to the others, only Jonas had ever met him before.

“Yes sir. They are wearing dark grey suits and have been following us. They’re muggles in the employ of Sophie’s father, Dobby last saw them in the sports section.”

“I remember Drew saying that one of your friends has a problem father. Marcus, William, go fetch our new friends. Do it very quietly, but use Imperious if you have to.” Like Ripley had once told Harry and the rest of his Basic Combat class, some Unforgivables were in fact forgivable.

Mitchell’s other associate stayed behind, as Harry gave them the 30 second rundown, imparting information to them that the others hadn’t necessarily known about. By the time his spiel was over, Marcus Giles and William Miller had returned with their two prisoners, who both had glazed expressions on their faces.

“It went down without a fuss Mitchell, they’ve been very cooperative. Meet Robert Ryan and Terrence Benedict, they’re private detectives employed by one Peter Weir.” Wendy turned and ran into the bathroom, whereupon she became very sick. Sophie ran after her, followed closely by Reiko and Claudia. The men stood there, silent for a moment. Harry introduced Ned and Jason, and Mitchell sized up Jason as the one to deal with.

“Jason, I think once your mother returns, we need to discuss having your father Obliviated.....that’s having his memory modified to erase any knowledge of our world.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Ned had an easy question.

“What about us? Would we have our memories erased as well?”

“No, not unless you want it. We can do that for you, if it would make things easier for you.” Jason was back into it now.

“Dad’s parents are magical, he apparently grew up in a magical house. Could you do that much modification?” Mitchell hadn’t know that, as the Listening Charms and their cause were not part of his fief within the Midwest DMLE.

“Something clearly needs to be done here Jason, but let’s wait until your mother comes out. Patrick, go get a special car, we had best talk about this back at Headquarters.” The other man hurried off. After about five more minutes, Wendy and the girls came out of the bathroom.

“I’m sorry about that.” Mitchell was more or less a cop, and had more than a little practice at this kind of thing.

“Don’t worry about it Mrs. Weir, this must be a lot to take in.”

“Yes it is. What do we do now?”

“My associate Patrick is getting our transportation, and we’ll do this at our Headquarters.”

“And where is that?”

“Milwaukee, but don’t worry, we’ll go there magically. We’ll have you back here in no time at all.” Wendy looked at her watch, it was now 1:00 pm.

“We have a three hour drive back to Springfield, more probably in this weather.”

“We’ll save you the trip, we’ll transport you back to Springfield ourselves, I’ll have someone get your car down there for you. All you’ll have to do is drive it a mile home.” He said this nicely, but with such a sense of control that Wendy felt like she had little choice but to go along with it.

“All right.” Patrick returned a minute later, and gave the okay sign. Marcus and William led their guests out the front door, and Mitchell motioned for the others to follow. Once at the car, he turned to the magical kids.

“Harry, you and your friends may come if you like, or I can come see you afterward. It’s your choice, but you’re welcome if you want to come.” Sophie didn’t hesitate.

“We’re coming, I want to see this through.” The others nodded, and they all piled into the car, which somehow fit fifteen people into a Ford Explorer. They turned down an alley and then zipped off via the portkey. They wound up in a garage under the Flackter Alley Auror Headquarters. They journeyed up to a conference room, and the muggle detectives were placed into chairs. After some quiet haggling between Baylor and what appeared to be a doctor, the doctor administered Veritaserum to the one named Robert Ryan. Baylor waited a few minutes for the potion to sink in, reading a couple of files that he had been brought.

“What is your full name and age?”

“Robert Alexander Ryan, I’m 45 years old.”

“Where do you live?”

“2334 Euclid Street, Springfield, Illinois.”

“Who are you employed by?”

“No one, I run my own firm.”

“What were you doing today?”

“Following a woman named Wendy Weir.”

“Who hired you to do that?”

“Her husband Peter.”

“Did he say why?”

“He thought she was meeting their daughter behind his back.”

“Why would that be bad?”

“He wouldn’t say, and I’m not paid to ask questions like that.”

“Have you followed her before?”

“No, Terrence and I were hired on Monday.”

“What were your instructions?”

“Just to take pictures.”

“Did he give you any instructions about the daughter?”

“No, he said we were to leave her alone.” Harry heaved a loud sigh of relief.

“Have you contacted Peter Weir since you saw the daughter today?”

“Just once, as we were tailing them from the Sears Tower.”

“Are you aware that there is a magical world, hidden from your own?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Baylor had heard enough, and he cut off the interrogation. He motioned for his people to remove their guests. Once they were gone, Mitchell addressed Wendy.

“Mrs. Weir.”

“Please call me Wendy.”

“Mitchell. Wendy, we need to discuss having your husband’s memory modified.”

“I was thinking you would bring that up. Has it really come to that Mitchell?”

“I believe that it has Wendy. While our guests were being prepped, I read up on your situation. Your husband's attitude could expose our world, and having read his file, I'm surprised that he hasn't spilled before now.”

“I'm not trying to be antagonistic about this, but do I have any say in this?”

“We are consulting you Wendy, but we will do what we have to do. And there is Sophie to consider. Just because he did not authorize a kidnapping, it doesn't mean that he wouldn't in the future if you continued in contact.”

“I'm her mother, I only want what's best for her.” Well there was a little problem with that.

“You are no longer her guardian Wendy, you and your husband ceded those rights when you made her choose between yourselves and magic.” Wendy went quiet for a moment, as Jason asked the obvious.

“Then who is her guardian?”

“Professor Joanne Murray is the guardian for all those in Sophie's situation, which if I read correctly includes Miss Cregg here in its generalities. The appropriate alterations have been made in the muggle world as well, as Murray is also the head of the ghost boarding school that these kids, and my own son, are registered at.”

“How much will you have removed?”

“We will just remove the fact that Sophie is magical. His childhood can remain the way it is. All we will do is make sure that he thinks that your daughter is just as muggle as your sons here are, only she is

much more gifted and goes to a different school.....yes Jason, Ned, I know that your IQ scores are similar to Sophie's, but that is the story that will be fabricated." One of Baylor's gifts was speed reading, and he had a near photographic memory to go with it, part of the reason that he had reached his position of Head Auror at the age of 30.

"Will this hurt him at all?"

"No Wendy, it is a totally painless procedure, akin to someone tapping him on the head lightly."

"Then do what you must, I won't object.....I can't." Baylor was rather surprised that she had agreed so readily, but he wasn't complaining. He would ask the Head Unspeakable, whose department ran the Listening Charms on problem families, to expand their coverage. This would bear having closer scrutiny, at least for the near future.

"Fair enough. I will order it done tonight. I suggest that you and your sons go out to dinner, and do not return home until at least 7:00 pm. After that, do not speak of this with your husband, not at all. Wendy, Jason, Ned, can you handle that?"

"We can, can't we boys?"

"Do what must be done."

"Yeah, I don't have a problem with it." Baylor got up and left the room, followed by his associates. The silence was thick in the air, until Wendy looked at Harry.

"You did the right thing Harry, having all of us followed like that. I don't know what I would have come home to if those two had been allowed to make their report. All this is for the best." Wendy indeed had been scared blind after she heard the confession from Robert Ryan, and was much, much calmer now.

“She’s right Harry, this has been building for years, maybe it will give Dad peace to have all this off his mind.”

“Jason’s right, if this relieves a burden from him, well then that’s a good thing.”

“I wish it didn’t have to be like this, I really do. I’m sorry.” Sophie hadn’t said a word in quite awhile, but looked right at her boyfriend.

“Everything happens for a reason Harry, you did nothing more than try to look out for me, like you have every day since we met. You didn’t make Dad do any of this. And if he had touched one hair on my head, or Mom’s.....I would have helped you take care of him, I swear to God.” Wendy looked at her daughter with no small amount of incredulity.

“You don’t mean that Sophie.”

“You better believe I do Mom, I’ve spent five years plus in exile because of his jealousy and immaturity, cut off from my family. Well by God I’m tired of having his whims dictate my life. This Obliviation better take, or my rich boyfriend here will bring someone over from Britain to do the job right. Do you hear me?” She shouted at what she assumed were Listening Charms inside the room. Only Reiko had heard this kind of rant before, and even then only a couple of times in the first year of exile. Harry in particular had never seen her this angry, and was a bit flummoxed as to how to handle it. Hermione and Ginny angry he was used to dealing with, but not someone he was snogging. Fortunately, Mitchell came back in.

“It will take Sophie, don’t worry about that. We’re very good at this kind of thing here. In fact, the team I dispatched is the same one that handled Claudia’s parents. No need for Harry’s people to come over here, as efficient as they must be in Britain at this sort of thing. Now Wendy, would you like to be taken back to Chicago? Or directly on to Springfield?” Wendy had already decided on that one.

“Chicago please, we need some time to come down from all of this, the drive back will help us do that.”

“Not a problem. The kids can floo back to the Forresters’, Steele’s, and Tecumseh from here. Now I’ll leave you to say goodbye, just give a yell when you’re ready to go, and we’ll get you back to your car.” He left again, and Wendy got up, going over to Sophie. She put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“I understand why you said what you said Sophie, and I don’t really blame you. I’m going to talk to Peter’s parents and see what I can do from that score. We’ll see each other during your spring break, okay? If your father truly thinks you’re going to be a……a muggle? Is that what you call us?”

“Yes mom, its not a dirty word or anything, its just a term.”

“Well if he thinks you’re a muggle, then you can come to the house. We can be a family again, without any bitterness or hostility. If I had known how simple it would be, I would have asked your people to do this years ago.” Sophie got up and hugged her.

“I’ll be there Mom, I’ll write you in care of Ned or Jason.” Wendy nodded goodbye to the others and left the room.

“Be good little sister, we’ll see you in a few months.” Ned and Jason both gave her a quick hug, and followed their mother out. Claudia looked at Sophie.

“Is it really that simple?”

“No, because I’m a Witch, and they’re not. It will always be in the back of their minds, well except Dad’s.”

“Will you still go see them come spring?”

“That’s up to them, and I’ll even go along with pretending I’m a muggle if it keeps the peace. But that’s it, I’m done sacrificing. Now I say we go to the island today and tomorrow, we need some relaxation. All those in favor, raise your hands.” They all did, relieved

that she was calming down. They left the room to go floo back to Warrick's, and Harry and Sophie went last through the fireplace.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm okay now Harry, I'm with my family right now, and you guys always pull me through."

"I love you Sophie, I'll always be there for you."

"I love you too Harry, and I'm there for you too."

"Merlin knows I need you for that too." They both laughed and kissed for a good long time, though not long enough for someone to come back looking for them. They got back to Warrick's and everyone had their last 36 hours of fun at Isla de Marauder, getting nice and tan.....well not Warrick, he was tan enough already. They went over the events of Friday in detail, and not for the first time, agreed that Harry's hiring of Dobby and Winky was a masterstroke of epic proportions.

Sunday, January 5, 1997

Great Lakes

10:30 am

Harry and Warrick took the portkey in that morning, getting there first of all the gang, the rest of whom wanted their sleep. They arrived in the Dining Hall at the end of breakfast, and the room was about half full with returning students who were either just returning, or eating, or both. Neither of them wanted anything to eat, so they slowly wandered up to their room. Once in the Cortez Lounge though, they were greeted by a strange sight:

Joe Clancy was pink.

Yes pink, all over, from the top of his head to the soles of his shoes, and everything in between, eyes and teeth included.

“There they are! They did this!” Two guesses who he was pointing at.

Standing next to Clancy was Professor Heyman, who had an enigmatic look on face, with all the onlookers going quiet now. Harry was looking up and down at Clancy.

“Why Joe, words fail me.” They didn’t fail Warrick however.

“That is so your color Joe, I mean it really suits you.” Heyman was neither smiling, nor frowning, and there seemed to be a battle ongoing within him on whether or not to show what he was really thinking. He turned his gaze on the new arrivals.

“Harry, Warrick, welcome back. Can you explain this?” Harry and Warrick looked at each other, and then gave into laughter. After he stopped heaving, Harry explained.

“Yes sir, we can. You see there was an incident before Christmas Break where Joe’s furniture allegedly got rearranged. We were there when he started yelling about it, and while he didn’t accuse us outright, you yourself know how he blames us for everything.”

“We were leery of a some payback, Joe here being that kind of guy you know. So Harry, Rick, Terry, and I arranged to have our dorm room door booby trapped. If someone who was not one of us, or a house elf, got through the door, he or she was to be magically expelled and made pink.”

“We would be more than happy to show you the combination of charms that we used, anytime you like.....in private of course sir, we don’t want to encourage any copycats.” Harry had found them in one of his obscure books, and the whole thing was a variation on what Dumbledore had done with the Age Line at the beginning of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, searching for it with an eye toward putting it on the trunk floo, just in case the whole secret of it unraveled. Rick and Terry had been all for it, they had no more love for Clancy than

Warrick did, and they took a chance that neither Murray nor Heyman would do a room inspection while they were gone.

“Joe, what do you say to that? Never mind, let’s go check the rooms out. Harry, how long is this going to last?”

“The door charms are indefinite, unless cancelled. Joe will be pink for a total of 12 hours, though I do know the reversal spell if need be.” The four of them walked to the boys’ doors. A pair of quick scans by Heyman revealed nothing on Clancy’s door or it’s environs, and a triple combination of charms that even Heyman, a former teacher of the subject, had never come across.

“Joe, I think you should say something here.” He had no other way out of this but to confess, though he did not go down willingly.

“Okay fine, I tried to get in there to do to them just what they did to me. They broke into my room, why shouldn’t I break into theirs?” It was a rhetorical question, but Harry answered it anyway.

“Well we didn’t break into your room Joe, you bloody moron. You yourself told Ed Lattimore that day that nothing was taken anyway. Professor Heyman, unless you and Professor Murray both specifically order me to, I will not undo his pinkness. An example needs to be made here.” The example being ‘I am not to be trifled with’, Harry had to restrain himself from saying, but the inference was noted by all.

“Furthermore sir, we demand that he be officially punished for trying to violate the sanctity of our room.” The two of them stared hard at the Deputy Headmaster, feeling hypocritically righteous, as they had provoked Clancy into his deed. Heyman suspected as much too, so he was happy to disappoint them.

“I would say that you have punished Joe sufficiently at this time. That said, I have no problem with the booby trap staying on your door, provided that you place Professor Murray and myself under the same immunity that yourselves, your roommates, and presumably your collective girlfriends all enjoy.” Harry had been ready to suggest just that anyway.

“All we need is a hair and some privacy from certain nosy criminals.” No way was he going to let this spell cocktail out for public use. Heyman had no objection.

“That’s fine, Joe, please go await me in the Lounge.” Clancy was near apoplectic, and thus did something very rash..

“Make him take this crap off me!” The Deputy Headmaster’s voice took a hard tone, as he took a step toward the boy.

“Yelling at me gets you nowhere positive Joe, don’t ever forget that.” Warrick almost peed in his pants at hearing that, something he had wanted to hear for many years now. Clancy, perhaps to his credit, saw the landscape change and reacted accordingly.

“Yes sir, but may I please wait for you in my room?”

“No, you will go into the Lounge. You will not be given a detention, but you need to understand that you do not have carte blanche to enter someone else’s room without their permission, however you think they may have wronged you. Now go.” Clancy walked slowly toward the Lounge door, and the other three remained silent until he was away.

“Was that a smokescreen, or do you really need a hair from me?”

“A drop of blood is what’s needed sir, either that or you hold on to someone who is protected already.” Heyman just shook his head.

“I would call you paranoid, but you’ve already been proven correct, so that won’t float, will it?” Harry just smiled politely, as Heyman did a quick Cutting Charm on his forearm. At Harry’s direction, he put a drop of blood on the doorknob, and Harry then pointed his wand at the knob and barely even whispered a six word incantation, done so that Heyman couldn’t hear it exactly. No glow or anything resulted, but it was done nonetheless.

“So that’s it? How will I know?”

“Well you could go through the door and not become pink, or you could take my word that I’ve done the exact same procedure with ten other people, myself included, and none of us changed colors.” Heyman chose the latter option.

“I’ll take your word for it. Now, off the record, why did you rearrange his furniture? Was it payback, or did he do something new?” Warrick took that one.

“Both sir. It was a kind of fun way to send him a message about his past behavior. And I did see him be really nasty to a Novice girl that week, about computer use or something like that, I didn’t hear the whole thing. I did hear her crying afterward though.” Heyman sighed. He had heard from Clancy all about Harry’s threat to him, and had noticed that the loner stayed as far away from the gang as he could get away with. Now it seemed that he was visiting his unpleasant demeanor on the younger kids, and that was not going to last long if Heyman had anything to say about it, and he did.

“All right, I suppose thanks are in order for sticking up for a younger student. One condition though: leave his room alone. It was funny once, but don’t do it again. Am I understood?”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes Professor Heyman.” They agreed too quickly for Heyman’s taste, but he let it lie.

“Now Harry, if you would do me a personal favor.” Harry anticipated what the favor was.

“I’ll undo the pink if that’s what you really want sir.”

“It is Harry, I think he has finally gotten the message not to trifle with you. Any further incidents of him harassing a younger student, bring them to my attention okay?”

“Yes sir. Let us get our trunks inside “ He and Warrick removed their trunks from their respective pockets and slid them over to their beds. They walked back out with Heyman, who had shown some stones and followed them into the room, not turning pink. They entered the Lounge, and saw that things were more or less back to normal, though everyone had one eye on Mr. Pink. Said young man was sitting on an easy chair in the corner, trying not to attract any more attention that he already was.

Heyman walked to the door, and stood there as Harry and Warrick hesitated for a second. Then Harry approached Clancy, ambling slowly, with a cruel smile on his face, for the total effect.

And whipped out his wand, quick draw style:

Finite Incantatem!

Clancy nearly had a heart attack, and only just managed to keep his bowels normal, as the pink slowly receded, and his body returned to normal. He looked at his arms and legs, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Once he could breathe again that is.

The other students were engaged in fits of silent laughter, as Harry twirled his wand through his fingers, and then pocketed it. He walked up to Heyman, Warrick following him.

“I did the charm cocktail myself, so reversing it was easier than it would have been with somebody else.” Clancy had not fled though, not wanting to give Harry and Warrick the satisfaction.

“ Very well Harry, Warrick, enjoy the remainder of your day.” Heyman walked out the door, and only then let the smile reach his face. He passed a few students on his way down to his office, and all of them wondered at what had caused it.

Sophie and the others arrived in the next couple of hours, and were completely outraged that they had missed the show, even more so when they learned that Winky had not taken any pictures of it.

“Hey, I didn’t think he would be stupid enough to try to break into our room.”

“He’s just that stupid, and you should have prepared for that.”

“Oh like it wouldn’t have been obvious if I had my house elf waiting with her camera. Subtlety Reiko, subtlety. We’re lucky that Heyman didn’t nail us as it was. No need to be seen gloating about it.” The latecomers conceded that point, and soon everyone split up. The guys went to grab some younger students for a snowball fight, no magic used this time. The women, after commenting on the sizes of the guys’ brainpans, did their unpacking slowly, and wound up watching a movie in the Shawnee Lounge.

Two days later Josh Lyman agreed to sound out some of nieces and nephews at Pathfinder, of which there were five in various stages of schooling, as to whether they were interested in becoming WWW representatives. A day later, Dobby returned with the first sets of orders from Tecumseh and Salem. Steve had been marketing his butt off, and had sold \$1200 worth of product since Christmas Day, while Jessica had managed \$350, as she was not as natural a hustler as Steve was. Harry and the twins were ecstatic at the results, and the twins again congratulated Harry on emigrating.. Winky had taken to doing a couple of hours of manufacturing per day, mostly with easy stuff, like the candies. Her products all passed muster, and relieved some of the load on Fred and George.

On Friday Hedwig returned with a note from Karl Aylesworth saying that he and Lisa had decided to buy a trunk come spring, but they wanted to wait for Harry to show them how to use it. They had a week off around Easter, and they said it could wait until then. Karl also wrote that he was talking to Michael about him buying one as well, so Harry was soon going to become trunk maker Anthony Hook’s new best friend.

Sunday, January 12, 1997

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

Noon GMT

The inner core of the Death Eaters was gathered in the conference room, with Voldemort yet to make an appearance. Present were the unofficial department heads: Malfoy, Pettigrew, Nott, and Lestrage. Snape was not there for the session, as part of it would be spent discussing him. Greasy had not been treated any differently in the month since the Hogsmeade debacle, and he was not technically aware that he had been tortured. He knew something was amiss though, as his magical power and energy seemed to be reduced somewhat, and he was getting headaches more often than he had before, though those had come from some noxious Potions ingredients. There were potions that could alleviate some of his problem symptoms, but it did appear that his boss and his pet rat had been a little overzealous in their 'negative feedback'. Snape had not been allowed to leave Riddle Manor since his disciplinary session, and any shopping for Potions' ingredients had been done by flunkies.

Eventually Voldemort swept in, purposely keeping them waiting, to make a point one supposed. He sat down, and everyone came to attention in their seats, all the while praying that they wouldn't incur his dissatisfaction. Crucio had been handed out a little more often since the battle, though none in the room now had been hit with it since the Hogsmeade debacle.

"Let us begin. Wormtail, how have the recruitments gone?"

"We have fully replaced our numbers from the battle sir, and then some. In terms of raw numbers, we are roughly ten percent stronger than we were in December. In terms of magical power and ability, we are a little below par there, as our new recruits are not up to our usual standards. They are all eager to serve however, and will follow orders without question." Beggars couldn't be choosers after all.

“Good, every army needs shock troops, and cannon fodder. Malfoy, finances?”

“They’re looking fine my Lord, nothing new to report.”

“Nott.”

“I have found us a new Potions Master my Lord, if we are still looking at replacing the bungler.” None of the inner core had liked or trusted Snape in the first place, so the contempt for him was nothing new. Nott had been headhunting, so to speak, for the last three weeks, and had rarely been at Riddle Manor.

“Really, who is he?” It would be a he, since while Voldemort was not a true misogynist, he by and large preferred men for his important posts, Bella being the all important exception, but there were personal issues bonding the two of them.

“His name is Michael Parrish, he is 44 years old, and currently resides in Bodo, Norway.”

“Why have I heard that name before? He is not a Hogwarts graduate is he?” Voldemort’s encyclopedic memory had a mental file on all Hogwarts graduates of the last few decades, even the ones who matriculated while he was in exile.

“No sir, he attended Durmstrang, and taught there for ten years. The departure of the traitor Karakoff caused a shakeup there, and Parrish was eased out. He is Welsh/Norwegian by birth, and speaks perfect English. He has long been sympathetic to our cause, and with the right financial promises, he will come over here and take Snape’s spot.”

“I see that you said that the he would replace Snape. He is not willing to work with our man?”

“With him perhaps, as in Snape working for him. He won’t work under Snape, that was presented to me in no uncertain terms. He

respects Snape as a fine scholar, but feels that his own talents far exceeds our friend's in most every way."

"Is he correct?"

"By and large, yes. Snape is such an unpleasant personality that he does not have as much respect in the international Potions community that he perhaps should, but even factoring that in, Parrish is one of the leading people in the field, and in my opinion, the most talented Dark Wizard or sympathizer in his chosen area."

"Did you make any approach to the new man at Hogwarts?"

"I did my Lord, I visited him a couple of weeks ago at his family home. Charles Shepherd is probably the apolitical man I have ever met. He listened politely, and told me bluntly that he really could not care less who won the war, or how. All he wants is to do his work in peace. He only took the Hogwarts job for the experience, and the opportunity to examine his profession from another angle."

"So he is no Dumbledore loyalist?"

"No, nor is he a detractor. The old fool leaves him alone, much as he did with Snape, and Shepherd makes no waves." Draco had told his Master much the same in his reports.

"So what are the chances that Dumbledore knows that we are replacing Snape?"

"At my request, Shepherd assured me that he would keep our meeting private, and I believed him my Lord." As much as he trusted anyone's rational judgment in this room, Voldemort trusted Nott's, the man was not prone to hyperbole.

"Back to Parrish, what is he currently doing in Norway?"

“Private research, and some illicit brewing on the side. He does not come from a wealthy family, but he is comfortable financially due to his black market activities.”

“When can he get here?”

“Within two days of getting our owl, he would need that much time to pack up his things. He also has a few long-term potions brewing as we speak, so he would need a series of portkeys to get back to Norway.”

“What are his financial demands?”

“He wants a base salary of 10,000 galleons a month, plus access to unlimited supplies for his other research.” That wasn’t bad, though it was much more than they were paying Snape, which is to say that they were not paying him anything, as Snape had family money, and was, in theory, a true believer to the cause. Malfoy put forth his opinion:

“It seems to me that we have two options: Kill Snape, or force him to work under the new man. I for one advise killing Snape, his ego would never allow him to work under someone else, at least in Potions.” Lestrangle was next, as the bad man had let Malfoy have his say.

“Why don’t we send him back to Dumbledore, under Imperius? I’m sure he could get close enough to the old man to kill him.” Voldemort shook his head, he had noticed Snape’s recent decline, and while it had not saddened him, it caused it’s own set of complications.

“Even in his weakened state, Snape is too strong mentally to put under that curse. There are a select few, including Potter, Dumbledore, and myself who can do it, and Snape is one of them. No, that is not an option here, as nice as it sounds. Wormtail, what is your view?” Pleased that Voldemort had asked for his counsel:

“Are we agreed that Parrish is going to be hired?” Voldemort nodded at him.

“Then for the next two days we do nothing at all, and then we isolate Snape for a week after that.” Malfoy looked confused.

“Why is that?”

“To make sure that Parrish works out as we want. No point in killing Snape, and that is my preference as well Malfoy, until we have his replacement firmly on board and assimilated. Remember, this Parrish fellow is a mercenary, not a true believer. We have to make sure.” His Master was nodding in agreement.

“A sound plan Wormtail. Bella, take your husband and go to Parrish’s and help him pack, feel him out. If he has any second thoughts, kill him immediately. Leave as soon as the meeting is over.”

“Yes Master, it will be done.”

“Wormtail, find a place to isolate Snape. Take as many of those sleeping draughts as you think you’ll need, and two or three troops. Keep him sedated, do not let him get coherent enough to start poking through your mind.”

“Yes sir. I know the perfect place.” Nott couldn’t resist.

“Where?”

“The Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. The village itself is now deserted, and the tunnel to the Whomping Willow has been sealed, presumably by the old fool. It’s the last place they would ever think to check.”

“Excellent, take a team there immediately and get it set up. But before you go, I want you do one little thing for me Wormtail.” Pettigrew had a bad feeling about this, but had no choice but to respond:

“Anything my Lord. What is your wish?”

“Set up a meeting for me with Greyback.” Eh?

“Yes my Lord. For what time and place?”

“Two weeks from today, in Hogsmeade, sometime after dark, pick the time yourself.” Pettigrew did not like the sound of this at all, but pressed on with his questions.

“As you wish Master. May I tell him the subject of the meeting?”

“Yes, tell him that I will personally deliver the 50,000 galleons that are owed him, and a bonus of a like amount, as pre-payment for a future operation.” Pettigrew couldn’t believe his ears, nor could Nott or Malfoy. Bella just smirked at them.

“You want to kill him personally Master?”

“Yes I do Bella, he and his pack of animals only managed to kill two Order members. Useless they are, incapable of beating amateur rabble like Dumbledore’s fools. Plus, they’re abnormal as it is. They need to be liquidated.” Left unsaid was that if Greyback’s troops had won their battle, this conversation would not be taking place.

“He won’t bring his entire pack with him, will he? Would he be that foolish?”

“It does not matter if he does. If so, then we will destroy them in place. If not, then it will be our collective pleasure to extract the information from him. That is why the two week delay Wormtail, I would not dream of denying you a part in the fun.” The smile he gave would have frozen an active volcano, but Wormtail basked in the compliment. First he would get to experiment on Snape, though that had been left unsaid by his boss, and soon thereafter on Greyback. This was going to be a good month he thought gleefully.

“Thank you Master, I will not let you down with Snape.”

“I know you won’t Wormtail.” Lucius never looked happy when Pettigrew was praised, and this was no different. He eyed his rival with distaste, which was returned in kind.

“I will decide on an appropriate end for Snape soon, one that everyone here can enjoy.” Nothing like entertainment for his troops.

He then dismissed them all but Malfoy, as Bella and Pettigrew readied for their excursions.

“Malfoy, how familiar is your wife with the area around the Order headquarters?”

“She was in and out of there during all of her childhood.”

“Good, put her with one of the troops who has any art ability, there must be one out of all of them. I want a detailed as possible schematic of the house and its environs.”

“Yes my Lord, I will get right on it. I should point out though, that no one currently resides there, with the werewolf being at Hogwarts.”

“All the better Lucius, since we are not going to destroy it. We are going to take it over, and make it our southern Headquarters. I have found a way around the Fidelius Charm in place there, and it would be a knife in the old man’s heart if we were to yank the Black seat of power away from him. It rightfully belongs to your wife and Bella anyway.” He left out Tonks’ mother for obvious reasons, as she had just as strong a claim on it as Bella and Narcissa.

“A timetable my Lord?”

“We will do it after we take care of Snape and Greyback, but the planning and preparation needs to start now.”

“And are we contemplating any actions against the Ministry?” He was walking on dangerous ground here, but was hoping for a little of

their old dynamic. Voldemort gave him a 'don't press your luck Malfoy' look, but did answer the question.

"No, we need to deal with Greyback and Dumbledore first. Reduce our enemy list in turn."

"Is it possible that Greyback could make a deal with Dumbledore or Scrimgeour?"

"Not with our dear Minister, not after Hogsmeade, even Rufus has his limits. Dumbledore will make a deal with anyone, and that is what has me concerned." Malfoy could certainly believe that. Dumbledore likely still had hopes of converting Voldemort to the true faith, and Potter too.

"An approach through Lupin perhaps?"

"He is the logical choice, however complicated a history that the two animals may have. Best to nip that in the bud."

He waved Malfoy away, and the lesser man went off to floo his wife, who was still mostly in residence at Malfoy Manor, though she was under intermittent surveillance by The Ministry.

Tuesday, January 14, 1997

British Ministry of Magic, Office of the Minister

9:45 am GMT

Rufus and Amos Diggory were meeting this morning, to discuss the planned announcement of three Wizengamot seats to be filled, one of which was going to Arthur Weasley, though he had not yet been told. They were drafting the press release when there was a pounding at the door.

"Enter!"

An out of breath Travis Biller, along with an equally frantic Amelia Bones came shooting in.

“What the hell just happened? Are we under attack!” Then Rufus noted that the two newcomers were both grinning.

“Not quite Minister, though the news is big.”

“What is it?”

“The Australian Ministry has located Fudge, they sent a high-speed communication to us just a few minutes ago.” The floo was not designed for the kind of distance that there was between Great Britain and Australia, so the countries used the equivalent of the Pony Express, only with owls, for important, but secret messages. In a pinch though, they simply used a muggle telephone, something they had done with this. It was not considered very high security though, as they knew that the muggle American government alone was capable of intercepting any land-line phone traffic, and the secret of the magical world could not be risked.

“Oh my, oh my. Where is he?”

“A village called Flanders Park, in the Outback. It’s mostly made up of muggles, but rumor has it that there are some Wizards there.” The rumor was incorrect, but Biller didn’t know that.

“Are they sure that Fudge is there?”

“Yes they are, based on the photos we’ve transmitted to them. They haven’t gone in to get him yet, they wanted to wait to see if we wanted that privilege.” Rufus closed his eyes for a moment and thought about it. After about ten seconds he opened them again.

“I want both of you over there, take your old crew Travis, but have the Aussies go with you. I want this to be a joint operation. Amelia, ensure that our friends Down Under get their proper share of the reward for their help. They could also use the cash I’m sure.” Dark

Wizard Davey Hando had taken control of the Wizard population on the smaller island of Tasmania, and was becoming almost as much of a factor in Australia as Voldemort was in Great Britain.

“Yes sir, leave right away?”

“Yes, start the portkey journey as soon as possible.” When traveling long distances by portkey, it was recommended that rest periods be taken for every few thousand miles of the trip, to let the magic inside the body recover sufficiently. This meant that a Great Britain to Australia transit would take about 90 minutes.

“Should we question him there, or wait until we make the return trip?”

“See what you can get there, at least as far as the money goes, and find out immediately if he is in communication with Voldemort, or this Hando character. You have official permission to question him as hard as you need to Travis, with or without Veritaserum.” A smile crept over Travis’ face, he knew just how to handle this.

“Yes sir. Amelia, I’ll meet you in the portkey area in five minutes.” He left, and Bones looked at her new boss, who was her immediate subordinate less than four months earlier. Bones had wanted no part of the scrutiny and complaining that came with the position/responsibility/lot in life of being Minister of Magic. Even when Fudge was in power, she had still done mostly as she pleased, except for a few Potter incidents, and troubles with Dumbledore.

“Are we going to inform Dumbledore? As Head of the Wizengamot he should be told.”

“Let’s wait until we have the buffoon first Amelia, and see what his information is. I don’t trust Dumbledore not to tell his Order people, and I don’t want Voldemort getting knowledge of this until we have Fudge secure.”

“You’re convinced that Voldemort has infiltrated the Order.”

“Hell Amelia, he’s got spies inside The Ministry, why not Dumbledore’s group? I mean anyone who trusts Snape deserves to be kept out of the initial loop. I trust the three of us and Travis, that’s enough for now.” It helped with Amos that he was fed Veritaserum in his morning coffee everyday, one could never be too careful. Bones was curious about something.

“Did Biller tell you about the Potter/Dumbledore meeting at the Academy?” She assumed that he had, Biller was Scrimgeour’s protégé from way back, and the two had a firm friendship. It was widely assumed that Rufus would be the godfather of Biller’s child, once it was born. Rufus did not disappoint her.

“He did, showed it to me via pensieve even. The kid actually said he would kill himself before reconciling with Dumbledore on the old man’s terms. I tell you this Amelia, I believed him.”

“Moody said the same thing, he was half convinced that Potter was going to try to kill Dumbledore right then and there. Shouldn’t we intervene in this somehow? This is in danger of spiraling out of control.”

“Yes it is, but strictly speaking this is a private matter. If Potter wants to hate him, that’s his business, though I don’t blame him. If he wants us to prosecute Dumbledore for putting him with those muggles, then I would certainly be willing to do that, but only if the kid makes a direct request for us to do so. Until then though, we will not interfere.”

“Yet you keep tabs on Potter’s movements in America. You must have some interest in him.”

“The interest is on Voldemort’s and Dumbledore’s sides Amelia, and it is in our best interests to keep an eye on Potter because of that, if nothing else. Now you had better get going. I’ll speak to you when you return.” It was a gentle dismissal, but a dismissal all the same.

“Yes Minister.” Bones walked quickly to the portkey area, where Biller had their set of keys, they literally were keys, jingling from a muggle key chain. Joining them were Sarah Westbrook, Rob Graham,

and Edgar Stiles, a first year Auror who had completed his trials two days after the Malfoy trial disaster, and had been tabbed to replace Biller in the now Westbrook led crew.

“Are you all set Travis?”

“We are Amelia.” The two of them had a strange relationship, as did most DMLE Heads with their Head Aurors. Bones was technically Biller’s superior, but the younger man had the ear of The Minister, though Biller treated her with nothing but respect. He took out the first key, which would take them to Reykjavik, Iceland. From there it would be to Boston, then San Diego, Honolulu, and finally on to Canberra, where the Australian Ministry of Magic shared the capitol city with their muggle counterparts.

Time was not exactly of the essence, so the trip took a total of two hours, and the quintet arrived directly into the portkey area at the Ministry. They were immediately taken to the office of Head Auror Kieran Perkins, a former classmate of Biller’s at the Auror Academy. They shook hands heartily, with pats on the back that almost knocked the wind out of both of them.

“Travis, good to see you again cobber.”

“Likewise Kieran, how’s the family?”

“Fine, the oldest just started at Endeavor. I understand you have one on the way?” The Endeavor School was the Australia/New Zealand version of Hogwarts, though the governments were separate.

“Coming soon, about three months and change.” Biller introduced his colleagues to his former classmate.

“Good to meet you all. I gather you want to do the takedown?”

“In concert with your people. As far as the Minister is concerned, you folks get the full reward once we get him.”

“Very decent of you. I’ll grab a couple of our people and we’ll be on our way.” He walked to the door and hollered some unintelligible words out it.

“How far is this place from here?”

“About 1200 kilometers south by southwest. It’s a good thing you took a couple of hours to get here, we had to hand-make some portkeys to get us there.” Soon a couple of female Aurors came into Perkins’ office. He introduced them as Susan O’Neill and Petria Thomas, his assistants. O’Neill gave them the report.

“Your man is not aware that he has been spotted, at least as far as we know. We have one of our guys watching the place just in case. He’s living in a regular muggle house that’s been ‘enhanced’ a little bit. That’s how we found him. We were searching for one of Hando’s men, and there was a tip that he was hiding in Flanders Park. The tip turned out to be bogus, probably to throw us off the trail, but while examining the houses for magic, we came across your man Fudge.” She handed over a Wizard’s photo, and Biller and Bones needed barely a second to confirm that it was either Fudge, or his heretofore unknown twin brother. Bones made her first contribution to the conversation.

“Well we’re convinced, we can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Petria, you have the portkey?”

“Right here Kieran.” She pulled two lengths of rope from her pocket, with so many people they would likely need more than one. Westbrook had a question first.

“If you didn’t have portkeys ready, how did your man get there?”

“He did his tour by broom, a lot cheaper than continuously making portkeys, and the floo doesn’t go out there. It wasn’t the first town that he searched.” The Australian Auror Command numbered less than half of the British troops, with a much wider area to deal with. Which is why they were both relieved and puzzled that Hando and his gang

had settled on Tasmania, rather than set up shop somewhere in the vast Outback. Hando was ruthless in his counter-intelligence efforts, so they had not been able to place anyone inside his organization as of yet.

After a quick walk to the porkey staging area, the five Brits and three Aussies each grabbed on to part of the ropes, and at Perkins' command, they zipped off.

They reappeared, 15 seconds later, about 200 meters outside of a small village that could have passed for Ottery St. Catchpole, if any of them had ever been there. The village of Flanders Park, population 303, was about a half kilometer from a railroad crossing, though the octet made landfall on the other side. They started the walk towards town, as Perkins and Biller fell into step beside each other.

"How hard are you folks going to lean on him?"

"Probably not hard, I doubt our former Minister has much stomach for the idea of torture." Biller had rarely sounded so disappointed in front of his old friend, whom he had last seen three years earlier at an Auror conference in Dublin.

"You'd think he would pick a more populated spot to hide."

"Who knows what goes through that mind, half smart, half idiot. Quite the dichotomy. Did you ever meet him?"

"Once, when he visited the Academy that time. You remember? He gave one of those lectures on your man Voldemort."

"Ah yes, not a bad lecture. I always thought his ideal job would have been teaching History of Magic at Hogwarts." Both men chuckled at the thought.

"I doubt he has the money on him."

“I would think not, but we’ll make him pay a visit to whichever bank he has it stashed in. If there’s enough left, your Ministry’s reward will come out of it. We’re more interested in the closure than the cash.”

“And how is your old friend Scrimgeour working out as Minister?”

“Better than we could have possibly hoped for. I was praying that Dumbledore wouldn’t take the gig, I knew Amelia wouldn’t want it.”

“Fallen quite a ways, Dumbledore has, or so we’ve been reading. That Potter kid certainly put him in his place a few months ago didn’t he?”

“Harry’s a good kid, he just has some trust issues. We’ve gotten to be friends kind of, I like him.”

“Any shot of his joining us in the noble Auror ranks? Or do those trust issues include us?” Biller grimaced at the thought.

“Well not you and me Kieran, but he’s a suspicious little bastard, I don’t see him putting up with any political interference.”

They had reached the village now, and it was only another two minutes until they reached Auror Daniel Kowalski’s listening post, just about 10 meters from the Fudge abode. He appeared out of nowhere, and motioned for them to stop where they were.

“Any movement Daniel?” Kowalski, a 24 year old who had been part of the Hando hunting team for over year now, straightened up as he addressed his boss.

“Not since our last contact Kieran. I did a scan of the house, and he has a wide variety of charms and the like. Muggle Repelling, a few different Alarm Charms, and some magical enlargers.” The scan by itself would not set off the Alarm Charms.

“Sloppy, very sloppy. That many charms on a house just makes it scream magic. He should just have painted a target sign on the roof. How advanced are the Alarm Charms?”

“Pretty advanced Kieran. This is about as close as we can get without setting them off. They’re able to detect any magical being within 10 meters. How do you want to do this?” Perkins looked around, there was no one outside at the moment, but that could change very quickly this time of day. Ten meters was quite a distance if the defender was even halfway alert and ready.

“All right, we have to assume that there’s no floo system in there, but that he’ll have a portkey ready just in case, probably around his neck. We can try to place anti-portkey and anti-Apparition wards around the house, but from this distance they might not be too effective, depending on how much he’s enlarged the house.” He scanned the house himself, and found Fudge in the southeast corner, though he could not tell if the man was sleeping or not. It was 9:30 pm now in this part of Australia, nine and half hours ahead of London’s GMT.

“What do you think Travis?”

“Daniel, the Alarm Charms are only based on human presence?”

“Right sir, they won’t be activated by any wards we put up.”

“Just like Fudge, half measures. So much wasted time, confusing motion for accomplishment. Okay, I say we wait for a few hours until he’s asleep. Then when we rush him, it will give us a few seconds that would not have had otherwise.” Kieran was nodding in agreement.

“Good idea, let’s set up a tent just outside of town. Susan, Petria, take over for Daniel here. Daniel, come with us and you can get a nap in before the raid.” Kowalski looked relieved, it had been a hot day, and still wasn’t too cool, even at this time of night. After setting up a signal package with Thomas and O’Neill, they walked back out of the village, this time throwing Disillusionment Charms on

themselves, so that any local passers-by would not wonder at the sight of seven strangers leaving their town. They got back to their entry point, and Perkins put up the tent, one similar to another tent owned by a Perkins, the Warlock that loaned Arthur his two and half years ago for the World Cup. They relaxed and swapped news, as Daniel got his kip in. Australian Minister of Magic Ian Thorpe had just assumed power and was prosecuting the conflict with Hando as hard as he could, though the Dark Wizard was not yet bold enough to meet the Aussie Aurors in full battle.

Hando, contrary to what many thought, was not in contact with Voldemort or Xiong Ni, the other main Dark Wizards on the rise, nor were Voldemort and Xiong communicating at all. There was no Axis or Tripartite Pact with Dark Wizards, and none of them could see any advantages in cooperating with each other.

At around midnight, the group hiked back into the village, and found the two Aurors right where they left them. Fudge had not left, and was now in a different spot in the house. They had a weak Listening Charm up, but it could not hear snoring, though the two women were able to confirm that the television was not on. Biller and Perkins quietly conferred for a couple of minutes and worked out a plan. Perkins assembled the troops and gave out their assignments, talking in a muted tone.

“Okay, here’s how we’re going to do it folks. We’re going to blast the wall in front of Fudge’s bed and Summon him over to us. Petria, Susan, you put a Soundless barrier all around the house, do any overlapping you feel is necessary, we can’t be waking up the muggles now can we? Daniel, you stand with us and keep firing anti-portkey wards right at Fudge as he’s flying to us. Amelia, do the same with anti-Apparition. Sarah, Rob, Edgar, you will do the blasting. Use Reducto, not Abrumpere, we don’t want to damage the man any more than necessary, for obvious financial reasons we would prefer that he remain alive. Travis and I will do the Summoning. Are there any questions?” No one seemed to have any, and O’Neill and Thomas took a couple of minutes to put the barriers up around the house. Once that was done, Bones and Kowalski began firing their wards right at the spot Fudge was in, followed by Westbrook, Graham, and Stiles taking aim at the wall.

REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO!

Not with full intensity, but just enough to collapse the wall. Fudge leapt out of bed and indeed grabbed for a necklace around his neck as Bones and Kowalski now moved forward and hit him directly with the wards. Biller and Perkins drew a bead on Fudge and:

Accio Fudge! Accio Fudge!

The ex-Minister flew right to the two of them, landing right at their feet as they took the Summoning Spells off just at the right time. Bones and Kowalski quickly warded the immediate area around them, though Fudge was too shaken up to do much at the moment. He managed to clear the dust from his eyes, and looked up to see Travis smiling grimly at him.

“Well hello there Cornelius, long time no see.” He slammed his fist into Fudge’s face, knocking him out, and then conjured some magical ropes and bound the man from head to foot, confiscating his portkey necklace, if indeed that’s what it was. He cast a perfunctory stunner on his former boss, just in case. Meanwhile Perkins was motioning to his people.

“Susan, Petria, Daniel, go in there and tear that place apart. Find anything remotely of value and bring it back with you to the home office.” Bones was nodding.

“Sarah, you and Edgar go with them, there might be things you spot that they wouldn’t necessarily, confiscate any papers you come across, and anything that looks like it would be a portkey or a bank key. Rob, you will come back with us and assist Travis in the interrogation.” Rob Graham was almost two meters tall and very strong. He was not built too well for undercover work, without Polyjuice anyway, but just the sight of him advancing in anger scared a confession out of most.....though in reality he was a genial guy, and quite intelligent, as is the stereotype.

The five of them walked through the rubble, ignoring the Alarm Charms that were now going off inside the soundless barrier that the two women had created. Sarah repaired the damage to the wall as she went in, so any muggles wandering around at night would not see or hear anything amiss. After making sure that the others had a portkey to return to Canberra, Biller, Perkins, Bones, Graham, and Fudge made the journey back. They quickly hustled Fudge into an interrogation room, and managed to get him sat up, waiting on the others to return before administering any Veritaserum. It had been a few minutes since his knockout, and the older man was finally coming to.

“What is going on here? Where am I?” Bones answered him, this was something she had long wanted to see, in her hearts of hearts anyway.

“Where do you think you are Cornelius?”

“Ameila?” Fudge was shaking his head from side to side, about the only serious movement he was allowed by the ropes trussing him up.

“Well you seem to be alert. How have you been Cornelius? Enjoying your vacation Down Under?” Fudge was surprisingly calm, considering the pickle he was in.

“It’s been very relaxing, thank you. What are you going to do with me?”

“Well that depends doesn’t it? Where is the money? Three million galleons Cornelius, that will buy a lot of copies of The Daily Prophet.”

“What terms are you offering?” Bones looked at him like he was crazy.

“Veritaserum, Cornelius. Those are my terms, and that is being generous. I could always have Travis and Rob work on you for a little while, with or without wands. That would be at their discretion.”

“I don’t believe you Amelia, I was Minister of Magic, you wouldn’t let them torture me. Rufus would never condone that.”

“So you’re up on current events eh? Travis, what did The Minister say about our friend here?”

“That I have official permission to question you as hard as possible Fudge, with or without Veritaserum.” Bones smiled genially at her former boss.

“Does that satisfy you Cornelius?”

“What is this about? It’s only a little money, I earned it damn it!” Biller was now very happy at the intransigence, and it showed in his face.

“We’re just going to wait for a few minutes, until our colleagues get back from your little vacation home. Then we start the questioning, and God help you if you lie to us.”

“At least tell me how you found me.” Biller and Perkins looked at each other, no harm in that. Fudge wasn’t going to be let loose for a good long while.

“We were looking for one of Davey Hando’s men, and stumbled across your magical enhanced house. Pure accident. Should have lost yourself in Sydney or Melbourne. Too bad for you.”

“I hate big cities, I always loathed working in London.” It was that simple, just a preference for a rural life.....albeit one with millions of galleons at his disposal. They waited in silence for another ten minutes, with Biller smirking at his prey. This was having its intended effect of unnerving Fudge, who was now sweating, though the room had magical air conditioning running.

After that time had passed, the others returned. O’Neill made the report.

“We ransacked the house and found absolutely nothing, except this, and a couple of house elves.” She handed over a tiny key, that looked just like a Gringotts key.

“Where is the key to, Cornelius? Tell me now and I can guarantee that Travis won’t experiment on you.”

Fudge took one look at Travis Biller, and remembered all the times that he had authorized this man to do exactly what he was about to do now. Biller was no sadist, but Fudge knew how thorough he was, and how unemotional he got while doing it. He sighed and gave in.

“It’s a key to a vault in Corrinus Alley in San Francisco.”

“How much of the money is left?”

“I’ve only spent 100,000 galleons of it, the rest is there.” That left 2,900,000 galleons remaining, of which half, plus 500,000, went to the Australian Wizard Government, who would not be having any budgetary issues for the coming year any longer. Bones took a pre-prepared piece of parchment out of her pocket and handed it to Sarah Westbrook. The paper told whichever bank in possession of the stolen money that the bearer was acting on behalf of the British Wizard Government, and was authorized to seize the money. Stapled to it was an arrest warrant for Fudge, and those two documents would be enough to get the goblins to hand over the cash.

“Take this and get our money back Sarah. 1,950,000 of it should be transferred to the government accounts here, and the rest to our accounts at Gringotts. If they give you any trouble, come back here and report to me, and I will go with you to resolve it. Edgar, go back to The Ministry and inform the Minister of our success. Tell him that we are recovering the money, and are in the process of questioning the traitor. This is too sensitive to allow on the telephone lines, our nosy American muggles could make sense out of it if we’re not careful enough. Both of you, go now.” Stiles and Westbrook departed immediately, talking hurriedly with each other as they went.

“All right now, Travis, you may begin your interrogation. Do you require any Veritaserum?” With a nod from her, Petria Thomas slipped out of the room to obtain a few vials of it.

“Not yet Amelia, let’s see what the man will tell us voluntarily.” He was interrupted by a knock on the door, followed by a very tall man in his early 50’s entering the room. It was the new Minister of Magic for Australia, Ian Thorpe.

“Kieran, I understand you caught your prey.”

“Yes Minister, with little trouble. This is Amelia Bones, Head of the British DMLE, Head Auror Travis Biller, and their colleague Rob Graham.” Bones walked over to shake hands.

“Pleased to meet you Minister.” Biller and Graham likewise greeted the newcomer.

“I thought that I would sit in while you question your prisoner. It will be your show, I’ll just be an observer.” Meaning that he wanted firsthand knowledge of any Hando intelligence that was gathered.

“Of course Minister, I would say be my guest, except that we are your guests.” Everyone but Fudge smiled at that, though he was relieved at Thorpe’s presence. It made it much more unlikely that Biller would torture him, at least that was his hope.

“Please, carry on.” Thorpe took a chair from the table and easily hoisted it, setting it down in the corner. Biller took this as his signal to begin. Susan O’Neill produced a Self-Writing Quill, and positioned just off to the left of Biller and Fudge.

“All right Fudge, I’m going to ask you some questions now, without any drugs. Then I’m going to ask you the same questions with the drugs. Any deviation and you get hurt, the amount of pain depending on the number of deviations. So it is in your best interest to tell me the truth from jump. Are we clear?”

“You couldn’t torture me Travis, you wouldn’t let him do it Amelia.” He couldn’t be more wrong about Biller, but Bones was no lover of this kind of thing actually, and had never done a ‘hard’ interrogation herself, preferring to use drugs. She looked at Fudge with a little sympathy.

“Unfortunately for us both Cornelius, you are wrong. Begin Travis.”

“All right Fudge, first up: When was the last time you spoke to Voldemort?”

“I never dealt with him, it was always Malfoy or Pettigrew.”

“When was the last one?”

“The day before the trial, from Pettigrew.”

“In person or by owl?”

“Both. First by owl, then a brief meeting in London.”

“And he told you when the assault would begin?”

“He told me about the werewolf diversion, and that was to be the signal.”

“You’re referring to the Hogwarts alarm?”

“Yes.”

“How much did they pay you? How long were you under their thumbs?”

“Half a million galleons for the year, for various services. I’ve been doing favors for them for the last three years.” That put it right around Black’s escape from Azkaban.

“And where is that money?”

"I spent it, there's none left." The most obvious point for a lie, and Travis made a mental note of it.

"Did they okay, or have advance warning, of Potter's emancipation."

"No they did not."

"Were they pleased or displeased?"

"Voldemort was not happy at first, but warmed to the idea. Pettigrew liked it from the start. Potter was already out of the country by the time I spoke with Pettigrew."

"So they found out about it via The Daily Prophet like everyone else?"

"So I gathered."

"When was the last time you had contact with anyone from Voldemort's organization?"

"The day of the trial."

"Pettigrew?" Fudge took a deep breath, and decided that he had to give them something right away, to put him in their good graces.

"Magdalena Edgecombe, she is their inside person now." Bones snapped her fingers at Graham, who rushed out, presumably to use the telephone.

"For how long?"

"I have no idea, years probably, she hates Dumbledore with a passion."

"What about you? Do you hate Dumbledore?"

“I’ve barely thought of the man for the last three months.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Fudge flared up briefly.

“Yes, I hate him, are you satisfied!”

“No, but let’s move on. Are you in contact with Davey Hando or any of his people?”

“No, I wanted nothing to do with Wizard politics anymore.”

“Are you sure? The drugs will make you tell me.”

“Of course I’m sure, you think I want to have you and Graham work me over? It’s not like anyone is going to come and rescue me damn it!” Travis just smiled at him, his one muggle vice was James Bond films.

“No Fudge, this is not a muggle film, and you are not the damsel in distress or the heroic spy, risking all for Queen and country.” This was hilarious in it’s irony, as Fudge knew Queen Elizabeth quite well, and loudly proclaimed his contempt for her whenever possible.

“How witty of you Travis.”

“So why Australia?”

“It’s out of the way, a place to get lost, yet not stand out as a stranger.” Fudge’s accent was more Australian now than English, part of his blending in.

“Why Flanders Park?”

“I told you, I like small towns. I could portkey to Sydney when I needed supplies. That’s where most of the Death Eater money went to, for a supply of portkeys.”

“How often do you venture out?”

“Once a week to Sydney, every day in town, they think I’m a muggle.”

“Well we won’t disabuse them of that, not that you’ll be going back there. Does anyone else know of your whereabouts?”

“No, I broke all contact with my family in Britain.” Fudge was divorced and had three adult children, but he had lost close contact with them upon being elected Minister.

“Who are those house elves? Recent hires, or longtime retainers?”

“The latter, Tranky and Krisby have been with me all my life.”

“Just out of curiosity, how long did you think you could run?”

“Forever Travis, I knew that this would happen if you ever caught up with me. I left civilization for a reason.” How noble, Travis was thinking.....though not really.

“You left with three million galleons of our money.”

“I needed a living, being Minister didn’t pay much. Ask Rufus, you’ll find that he probably has several lucrative ‘friendships’ just like I did. I’m sure Potter probably has him on the payroll by now.” Biller knew full well of the somewhat chilly relationship between Harry and Scrimgeour, but Harry had never spoken badly of The Minister to his hearing, or in public, and it was returned in kind. He thought it highly unlikely that there was a monetary relationship though, as Rufus seemed not to spend any money. He had no expensive hobbies, and spent little on things other than a nice house and Quidditch tickets, though even that was not a factor now that he was Minister.

“We’re not talking about Rufus, we’re talking about you. How did you do it? How did you siphon off that kind of money without anyone noticing?” Fudge spent the next five minutes detailing his plan, somehow done without any knowing accomplices if he was to be

believed. During this monologue, Susan O'Neill had returned with the Veritaserum.

“Okay Fudge, we’ve detailed your embezzlement, your Voldemort and Pettigrew crimes, and now we’ve come to the big finale. Is there anything else we need to know before we drug you? Remember, your prison time becomes easier to bear with every truth you tell us.” Fudge looked Biller right in the eye:

“I know where Voldemort is.”

End Chapter

Wednesday, January 15, 1997

Conference Room D

Australian Ministry of Magic

12:30 am AST

"I know where Voldemort is." Biller heard this, but had a hard time believing his ears. Fudge held his gaze as Travis slowly advanced on him.

"You do eh?"

"Yes I do Travis, and I have no motive to lie, your Veritaserum will confirm it." Travis stopped a meter from his prisoner.

"Well where is he?"

"I want a guarantee of no Azkaban if he is found." Biller loved this man's audacity, and even cracked a wry smile.

"Oh is that all? Why don't we just put you back in your little muggle home in Flanders Park, with a bouquet of flowers every other day!"

"That would be lovely, but I know you won't do that. A Ministry holding cell will be fine. You know my information is worth it, even if I don't give it up voluntarily." Neither Bones or Biller had the authority to promise Fudge a thing, and everyone in the room knew it, but Bones nodded her head.

"If your information leads to us making contact with Voldemort, then I will do my best to keep you from Azkaban." She didn't mention capturing Voldemort, as she thought it unlikely that would ever happen. In order for him to be stopped, he would have to be killed, though both of them were skeptical of the Prophecy. She knew of Harry's disdain for the idea of it, and found it increasingly unlikely that the kid would cooperate even if it was true, unless the enemy turned stupid and tried to attack him at Great Lakes. Bones felt that in

Harry's mind, going after Voldemort would be seen as doing what Dumbledore wanted, and it was not out of the realm that Harry would sit it out just to spite his former Headmaster.

"Very well Amelia, you are honorable, and I will take your word at face value. He is in Little Hangleton." Bones was dumbfounded, she knew where this was going, and it made no sense.

"You cannot be serious. Dumbledore tried to float that idea past us years ago, saying that Voldemort was really some half blood named Tom Riddle, from Little Hangleton. We checked the entire area and found nothing. You were there in The Ministry, you must know that." Fudge had rarely looked so smug.

"You were wrong, he is in Little Hangleton." Travis walked up to Bones.

"Amelia, a word." They walked out of the door and Biller closed it behind them.

"What is it Travis? Don't tell me you believe him?" Biller was ashen as he replied.

"Amelia, when I saw Harry's memory of the Ministry battle, I saw him talking to Voldemort. Amelia, Harry called him Tom, and Voldemort did not correct him." Bones aged a year in that second.

"Oh my God."

"How thorough a search did you people do of Little Hangleton last time?" Biller had been in the Academy when the war had ended, just about to graduate and join The Ministry. Bones had been a Senior Auror then, though she had not been on the Riddle investigation team.

"They searched up and down Travis, there was no magic on the Riddle house."

“And this Tom Riddle person? The name sounds familiar.” Probably because Travis had, in fact, read Hogwarts a History.

“A brilliant student at Hogwarts, Head Boy one year under Dippet. Dumbledore is convinced that he became Voldemort, though there is no evidence to support that theory.”

“And whatever happened to Riddle?”

“He disappeared after graduation, he was rumored to have settled in South Africa, but no one could confirm it.”

“Well we can use the Veritaserum on him, but if he sticks to that story, we have to go in again, and in force.” Bones was shaking her head.

“We can’t go in with force, if we lose another battle like in September we’re in big trouble. Voldemort can replace people much more easily than we can. We’re stretched thin with Aurors as it is, and The Minister won’t accept any outside help.”

“I thought that the whole point of The League was to rectify that? We have to send a force in there and at least find out. Use Dumbledore’s people as an auxiliary if we have to, whether the old man likes it or not. And if we allow French or German Aurors in, we would be establishing a bad precedent, and would look incredibly weak to those of our citizens sitting on the fence.” Amelia made a face.

“Politics.” Travis smiled faintly, cynically.

“Reality Amelia, we’re one more Ministry screw-up away from losing their hearts and minds, as our muggle friends are so fond of saying. All those years of Fudge have come back to haunt us.” She conceded the point.

“All right Travis, let’s find out what he really knows. Ask him how he found this information out, then we’ll go right to the Veritaserum.”

“Got it.” They went back into the room, to find a pleased Fudge, even with Perkins glowering at him.

“Have a nice chat?”

“Don’t press your luck Fudge. Now how did you come across this Little Hangleton information?”

“ Just give me the Veritaserum Travis, I’m done cooperating voluntarily. You have the money, you have Voldemort’s whereabouts, stop wasting everyone’s time.” Biller was no slouch at Wandless Magic, and decided to send a message.

“Rictusempra.” Fudge was caught off guard, and started twitching immediately, and with no hands free because of the ropes, was in a bind.....pun intended.

“I think you are forgetting your place here Fudge, our days as your subordinates are quite over.”

“Stop this! I’ve been cooperating damn you!”

“Make me Cornelius.” A bit childish, but Biller felt he was entitled to a little fun here.

“Please stop Travis!” Bones was doing nothing to interfere, and their Australian friends were staying out of it.

“ Finite Incantatem.” The jinx stopped, though Fudge twitched reflexively for a few more seconds. Biller took the vial from O’Neill and grasped his prisoner’s head hard, forcing a few drops down his throat.

“That was the one time today that I’ll do what you want Fudge, but only because it suits my purposes. We’ll wait a moment for the potion to take effect, and then we’ll talk.” Fudge was in the initial throes of the drug, and couldn’t respond. The room waited about three minutes,

and then Biller rehashed the man's previous answers, and Fudge had told the truth on every one of them. Then he got back to the big questions:

"Where is Voldemort hiding?"

"In Little Hangleton."

"How do you know this?"

"I had an experimental tracker placed inside Rastaban Lestrangle while he was in Azkaban." Biller's head was now about to explode, and the others were not too far behind him.

"Say what!"

"One of the Unspeakables came up with it, it's a biological virus, detectable with magic, but its not magical itself. I used it to track him to Little Hangleton after the escape." Biller's temper, which was normally under complete control, went redline at hearing that.

"Do you mind telling me why the hell you never mentioned this?" Veritaserum makes the user talk in a monotone, so any desire for Fudge to be sarcastic was lost in the shuffle.

"If Voldemort was caught, that would give away that I was working for him, I didn't want that."

"Who was the Unspeakable you dealt with?"

"Robert Marr." Robert Marr was considered the genius of the Unspeakables, but that also came with the reputation of him being crazier than a shithouse rat. He was in and out of St. Mungos all the time, and currently was in residence there in the 'mental issues' ward. He was always allowed back at the job though, because of his brilliance. Travis was now seconds away from visiting violence upon this man, but took a few deep breaths.

“Figures. How many other people did you track like this?”

“Just him, Marr wouldn’t give me the formula, it’s somewhere inside that diseased mind of his. He never did like writing anything down.” No he did not, and Veritaserum was not as effective when used on the mentally ill, Wizard or muggle. Biller still knew that he would be paying Marr a visit in a few hours time.

“Can this biological agent still be detected in Lestrage?”

“No, it was only meant to last for six months initially. I had it put in Lestrage about three months before his breakout. Marr was working on expanding the parameters of it, but he kept getting sidetracked.”

“Why Rastaban?”

“No particular reason, it could have been any of them, it was just for testing.” If Fudge hadn’t been under Veritaserum, Biller never would have believed that.

“Did you know of the breakout ahead of time?”

“I was told that there would be one, but not the time or date.”

“How far in advance of the actual breakout were you told this?”

“Seven weeks.” Seven weeks, Biller took out his wand and put it right at Fudge’s cheek.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kill you right now Fudge.”

“Because I’m helpless Travis, you couldn’t kill me in cold blood.” This was true, Biller thought grudgingly, but it didn’t have to remain this way. He would revisit this with Rufus as soon as he got back home.

“Who else at The Ministry knew about your dealings with Marr?”

“No one, he reported to me alone about it.”

“Who else at The Ministry knew about your arrangement with Voldemort?”

“Only Edgecombe.”

“Harry Potter told me that he shared the contents of a Prophecy with you, one that dealt with he and Voldemort. Is this true?”

“Yes.”

“Who else have you told about it?”

“No one.”

“Why not?”

“I was saving it as a bargaining chip, if Voldemort or his people ever tracked me here.”

“Why didn’t you tell Voldemort in advance of Potter’s emancipation?”

“It was none of his business, our agreement only dealt with his specific requests, it wasn’t a catch-all for any information I came across.” Oh for crying out loud.

Biller looked at Bones, and she motioned him to leave the room again with her. Graham was just now returning from phoning home as they walked out.

“Did you contact The Ministry?”

“Yes ma’am, I spoke to the Minister himself, Edgecombe is probably in a holding cell right now.”

“You made no mention of magic I hope.” Graham was muggleborn and had been using phones all his life, so he might not be as cautious.

“No ma’am, the conversation took less than 30 seconds, I simply said that the ‘man’ implicated Edgecombe. Our American muggles won’t get a lot out of that conversation ma’am, I assure you.”

“Good Rob, you’ve done well today. Travis, any suggestions?”

“Ameila, how many people inside the Ministry know about this besides us?” She did the count in her head, one that he could just as easily have done himself.

“Seven. The five of us that were here, plus Amos and The Minister. Why?”

“What would be the public’s reaction if Fudge was revealed to have been Voldemort’s stooge for three years?”

“I don’t know Travis, what are you getting at?”

“I’m saying that this could totally destabilize our government if it got out. Confidence in our integrity would plummet, and Voldemort wouldn’t be able to process the totality of his new recruits.” Bones saw where this was heading, and didn’t like it at all.

“You want to take care of Fudge right here, don’t you?”

“I want to present it to The Minister yes.”

“We’re not assassins Travis.” That wasn’t what he had in mind necessarily, but he felt like arguing the point anyway.

“We’re not?” They looked at each other significantly, while Rob prayed mightily that neither would look at him for any answers. Biller continued.

“We’re just inexperienced is all Amelia, having gotten our asses kicked in every major engagement we fought in up until Hogsmeade, and even then we needed Dumbledore’s people to take care of the werewolves. Let’s face it, Harry Potter and the Weasley twins are responsible for more kills than any of us, you and I included. That’s one abused kid and two troublemaking maniacs being more battle ready than any our rank and file Aurors. Every government kills people Amelia, muggle and Wizard alike. That said, I don’t mean we have to kill Fudge.”

“Oh really? You want to set him free?”

“With a massive memory wipe, yes. Put him back in that house with the knowledge that he is a Wizard and not a whole lot else. Bring in Redgrave to do it.” Steven Redgrave was the top Obliviator in The Ministry, he had a talent for it as an art form almost. Relieved that Biller didn’t want to march back into the room and Avada Kedavra Fudge right in his chair, Bones thought for a moment.

“Only Redgrave could do it too. That’s not a bad idea actually. We would have to set up some kind of way for him to make a living.”

“His account at Gringotts was untouched, he has about 30,000 galleons in there. We augment it some to give him a pension of a sort. Enough to live decently, but not extravagantly. Our Aussie friends here owe us one, so we’ll place Listening Charms in his house, and they can monitor them.”

“You’ve clearly been thinking about this.” An understatement Bones thought as she said this. She suspected that Biller and Rufus had hashed this out behind her back, and she was not happy about it. Their friendship was one thing, but she was still the Head of the DMLE, not Travis.

“Not for a long time, but I thought we should have a contingency plan, just in case.”

“All right, let’s ask Perkins to keep Fudge here while we present this to The Minister.” They went back inside and did so, and Biller told

Perkins and Thorpe his idea. They had no problem with it, and said that it had their endorsement, for what it was worth. Fudge of course heard every word, and voiced his strenuous objections, the drugs having worn off.

“You can’t do that to me! This is not right!” Travis looked at him with utmost contempt.

“Says a traitor, that’s rich. If I thought Minister Scrimgeour would let me, I’d gut you like a pig right here in this room. Count your blessings.” The look on his face made Fudge quail a bit, and he went silent. Biller had a quick inspiration, and winked at Bones behind Fudge’s back.

“You know Amelia, we could always release Fudge with his wand. Then I could kill him and no one could say he was defenseless. You do know how to fight with your wand, don’t you Cornelius?” Fudge opened his mouth and nothing came out but a squeak. Biller laughed and condescendingly patted the older man on the head, as even Minister Thorpe couldn’t help but smile.

“Just kidding Fudge, I don’t need the target practice quite that badly.” The Brits departed a few moments later, Sarah Westbrook not having made contact from the bank in San Francisco, so they assumed everything was fine on that front. Edgar Stiles was still en route back to the home office, and they started their journey a few minutes later, retracing their steps, so to speak.

It was now 5:30 back at the home office, but Rufus was still there, having been briefed by Stiles, a rather nervous young man, who nevertheless had gotten his superior caught up. Bones and Biller did the rest.

“Little Hangleton eh? Travis, send Jenkins and his crew up there on a scouting expedition, order them not to make contact if humanly possible. Have them do a sweep of the entire area for magic and magical residue.”

“You got it, Sanford is good at that sort of thing.” Biller left for a moment, and quickly returned. Rufus had gotten up and started pacing a little, which was his physical way of pondering. He stopped in front of his floo, and threw some powder in.

“Dr. Naveen Andrews!” Naveen Andrews was the head of St. Mungos, and he appeared seconds later.

“Minister, a pleasant surprise, what can I do for you?”

“I want you to find the Medi-Witch or Wizard that is in charge of Robert Marr, and get them and his complete file into my office right away. Marr is in the psychiatric ward if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yes Minister, I believe it’s Ian Cusick that handles Mr. Marr. He’ll be with you shortly sir.”

“Thank you Dr. Andrews, much appreciated.” The administrator’s head vanished.

“Travis, you know what must be done here.” Biller grimaced, but was nodding anyway.

“I figured as much, should I go over there tonight?”

“As soon as possible, that tracking agent could be incredibly useful to us.” Bones wondered about that.

“What if Marr mislead Fudge about its success? He could have told the idiot what he wanted to hear. It wouldn’t be the first time would it?” No it certainly wouldn’t, but Rufus wasn’t buying it this time.

“No Amelia, if Marr said it worked, then it worked. Travis, are you serious about wanting Fudge to be set loose?”

“Only with the caveat that his memory be severely modified. I think putting Fudge on trial would bring down this government and invite chaos. The only other palatable alternative is to throw him in Azkaban

without a trial, and if that got out, we'd still be finished. My idea is the path of least resistance."

"Well let's see what happens in Little Hangleton. If it turns out to have any credibility, then I'll consider it. If not, then the three of us will personally throw Fudge into the darkest part of Azkaban."

"And if we get caught doing that?"

"Then it would be better not to be caught Amelia." They were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Enter!" In came Ian Cusick, a young Medi-Wizard with long black hair, and a heavy Scottish accent. He held a thick file in his hand, and Biller's mood turned even darker.

"Minister, I'm here as ordered sir." Rufus rose to shake his hand, not having met the man before.

"I would like the 15 second tour of Robert Marr." Cusick went right into 'doctor filling in layman mode'.

"Marr suffers from paranoid delusions, that compounded with his own genius and creativity, makes him very unstable, though not especially violent."

"Is he a danger to anyone?"

"Not at the moment sir, he is on a regimen of potions, along with a couple of muggle drugs used for cases like this. Right now he is just on the north side of semi-catatonic Minister, and is likely to be that way for a little while yet. Marr's episodes generally last a couple of months, and he's been with us for six weeks now. I anticipate releasing him sometime the first week in February, give or take a few days."

"Can he be questioned?" Cusick immediately started shaking his head.

“With Veritaserum? You can try, but I wouldn’t advise it. The potion, in concert with his other medications, could cause a severe setback.”

“What are the odds of that happening?”

“If I was a betting man sir, I would bet for the setback. If it were anyone but you asking Minister, I would forbid it as his doctor, but in here I can only advise.” Or he could push it to The Wizengamot, but he didn’t know that Rufus wasn’t that eager for a showdown with Dumbledore over something like this.

“So it would be best to wait a few weeks to use the potion?”

“Yes sir, I took the liberty of making a copy of his file for your perusal sir. It has his complete history with us, all eight commitments.”

“Can we talk to him without drugs? Is he lucid enough for that?”

“I can give him a few stimulants if given an hour’s notice. He wouldn’t be ‘normal’, but you could get something out of him if you do it just right.” Gee, I wonder who that will be, Travis was mentally grumbling.

“Who visits him?”

“His wife and three children, I believe the oldest just started at Hogwarts. They’re nice people, and cope with Marr’s problems as well as can be expected.” Marr was 34 years old, and had never been Dark suspected, and as an Unspeakable he had been vetted more thoroughly than most.

“From now on Dr. Cusick, any visitors to him besides his wife and children are to be approved by either me or Madam Bones. Understood?”

“Yes sir, I’ll take care of it immediately upon my return.”

“Good, thank you for your time Dr. Cusick, if I have any further need of you, I’ll let you know. Please administer the stimulants tomorrow morning at 9:00 am, we will have someone there an hour later to talk with Marr.”

“Thank you Minister.” He walked quickly out of the office.

“Travis, go over there in the morning, without Veritaserum. See what you can glean from him in his condition.”

“It’s a shame really, he really is something when he’s in the groove.” Marr and Biller had attended Hogwarts at around the same time, though they had been in different Houses and different years.

“He will be welcomed back in a few weeks, and we’ll get as much out of him as we can, from all accounts he’s a fine man. Now Amelia, you don’t want Fudge in Azkaban, or us having him killed. What do you think we should do with him?”

“I think we can get away with a trial, I have more faith in our public than Travis apparently does. He’ll get his just desserts then.”

“Are you prepared to keep silent if we decide on another course of action?”

“Who is ‘we’ Minister? The three of us in this room? A troika where I will always be outvoted?” Rufus smiled as she said this, her tone of voice had been polite, but firm.

“Amelia, its precisely because we often disagree that I value your input, I have no interest in sycophants. Now who else would you suggest we allow inside on this? Who else can be trusted?”

“Why are you so suspicious of Amos?”

“I’m not, he is a fine administrator, but he has no political acumen, I mean none. I don’t want him in my inner circle because he would

have little to contribute, and he would be another mouth I would have to worry about blabbing to the wrong person. Next you will ask about Dumbledore.”

“No, I know why you don’t trust him, and by and large I agree with you. But you cannot ignore his position as Head of the Wizengamot.”

“The Wizengamot does not have investigative powers Amelia, that is our bailiwick.” Another knock on the door, and at Rufus’ signal, Travis opened it. It was Sarah Westbrook, just returned from San Francisco.

“Minister, Madam Bones, Travis. I completed our business with the money, it should be deposited in the Ministry’s general fund within the next four hours.”

“No resistance from the goblins?”

“No sir, not after they read the affidavit that Madam Bones sent with me.”

“950,000 galleons will help, and our Australian friends will owe more than a couple of favors as well. Good work Sarah. Now I would like your view on Fudge, Travis advocates setting him loose back Down Under with a memory wipe, while Amelia wants him put on trial. What do you suggest?” The 30 year old Sarah was another of Rufus’ former protégés, having been the junior member of a Rufus/Travis crew for a number of years. She was not the youngest crew leader, but one of the brightest, and it was not out of the question that she might succeed Travis as Head Auror someday, especially if Rufus retained his own position. They did not exactly have a father/daughter relationship, but it wasn’t that far away from uncle/niece.

“Kill him immediately Minister, I doubt you would have any shortage of volunteers from Auror Command to do the wet work, or even if you just select from those of us who went to Australia....well maybe not Edgar.”

“An interesting position, justify it.” Sarah had not heard Fudge’s full confession, or even that he knew where Voldemort was.

“Just him denying Voldemort’s return for all that time justifies it, it cost a lot of lives. Did he admit to being on the Death Eater payroll?” Rufus smiled.

“He did, since right before Black escaped. He knew about the trial assault ahead of time as well.”

“Another reason that stands alone. He doesn’t deserve the publicity of a trial, but I feel that a former Minister, however pathetic, should not be put in Azkaban. Voldemort and his people might even break him out and set him up as their puppet Minister.” No one would put it past him, at least none in the room right then.

“Are you saying take him into a deserted part of the Outback and put a killing curse into him?”

“Yes I am Minister. I hate to be so cold about it, and if was anyone besides Fudge, I wouldn’t be advocating it. But he’s a traitor sir, he abused the public’s trust for years, and he does not deserve to get away with it. We can’t risk The Wizengamot going all weird on us like they did with Snape.” It was the feeling of the majority of the DMLE staff that Dumbledore had all but begged his colleagues not to put Snape in prison, though no one in the body itself would comment for the record. The only reason that there had not been more muttering was the pleasant idea of Snape being Banished into a wall at high speed. Harry had made a lot of friends in the Auror Command that day.

“A good point Sarah, thank you for your views. Before you leave, how is young Edgar progressing?”

“He’s a great investigator, he’s just nervous in front of authority. He’ll outgrow that in time, was he all right briefing you?”

“Once he stopped stuttering he was fine, he seems like a good kid.” Stiles was very smart actually, he ranked number two overall in the Hogwarts Class of 1994, with Percy being number one that year.

“Thank you Sarah, you can take off for the day. Report back at 9:00 am tomorrow morning, you, Rob, and Edgar will accompany Travis to St. Mungos.” She raised her eyebrows at her former crew leader, as she had not heard the Marr stuff.

“No I’m not being committed Sarah, you’re not that lucky.”

“Damn it, I’m going to lose my wager if you wait much longer. See you guys tomorrow.” She left, and there was a short silence.

“Minister, you can’t kill Fudge in cold blood. It’s morally wrong, no matter what he has done to deserve it.” The Minister surprised her by smiling and nodding.

“I agree Amelia, I never seriously considered it. I thought her argument was compelling though, and if it was someone who was a greater threat than Fudge.....” But it wasn’t, thought a very relieved Bones, who then anticipated the other shoe dropping.

“But you won’t put him on trial?”

“Sorry Amelia, but I agree that Travis’ path of least resistance theory is the safest play here. We’re in no hurry though, this isn’t something that needs to be done tomorrow. Does your friend Perkins know to keep this quiet Travis?”

“He does sir, the lot of us discussed it as we were waiting last night.....sorry, this afternoon. The new Minister is a former Auror as well, and we can count on his discretion.”

“Good, now nothing more shall be decided until we hear from Jenkins.”

“Are you thinking a full assault if Voldemort is there?”

“That’s the question isn’t it? I agree that we cannot afford to lose another battle like in September. Voldemort can hit and miss, we can’t miss anymore or we’re finished. No, I’m thinking more along the lines of a lightning raid, but not until we find out if we can use that Marr formula.”

“Are you thinking of capturing one, putting the virus in him, then letting him go?”

“Something like that Travis. I have an easier option though, one that does not yet involve capturing a fugitive Death Eater.” Bones looked a little confused, while Travis grinned.

“An option named Narcissa Malfoy?” Even Bones liked that idea.

“Very interesting, she is relatively isolated at home, we could slip a team in there and take care of it.”

“Travis, after you get back from St. Mungos tomorrow, set up a heavier surveillance on Narcissa. Make sure the floo is monitored, and put a portkey tracker on the place, so we’ll at least know when she leaves. If we had known about Marr’s formula, we could have implanted it in Snape and ended this business months ago, but the pumpkin juice is spilled on that one.”

“Speaking of the floo, what happened with Edgecombe?”

“She’s in a holding cell right now, I’m going to let her stew tonight, and then I’ll go in there myself tomorrow, I don’t think I’m too rusty. Amelia, I would like you to sit in on this with me.”

“She hasn’t confessed to anything?”

“She doesn’t have a Dark Mark on her, we know that much. She declined to answer any questions though, not that I’m surprised. I highly doubt she knows the location of any Death Eaters, though I would like to find out how she evaded our net from October, it will

give us a lot of insight for counter-intelligence. She did not deny being a Death Eater or a Death Eater sympathizer, which seals it as far as I'm concerned."

"Do we need to line everyone up and have them take a vial of Veritaserum?"

"We might have to Travis, this is disturbing. On second thought, Travis, go to Hogwarts and inform Dumbledore that we have Edgecombe. Tell him it was an anonymous tip that smoked her out, and that we anticipate a full confession in the morning. Amelia and I will do it while you're chatting with Marr. It will give the old man the impression that he is still in the loop on things."

"Got it, go tonight?"

"Let's wait a little while and see if Jenkins sends some word back, but go after that. I know you've been wanting to talk to the werewolf about the kid, so you can kill two birds with one stone."

"Fudge thinks Harry's got you on the payroll already." The Minister got a nice laugh out of that one.

"Quite the opposite, I bought some of that joke stuff for my nieces and nephews, though I've heard that he doesn't take any profit sharing. I'm scheduled to go over there and talk with President Chabon and Prime Minister Crosby next month, I'll take a side trip to touch base with him."

The three of them moved on to other things for the next 30 minutes, getting some paperwork done and dealing with the vetting of Rufus' three nominees for The Wizengamot. He and Diggory had decided to announce them the following Monday. They were about to give up on any word from Jenkins, when the man himself appeared in the doorway. Rufus had just stood up to walk his subordinates out.

"Sanford, how did it go?"

“There is magical residue over certain parts of Little Hangleton, particularly the graveyard. It was made by more than one person, but we would need further testing to glean a more specific estimate.”

“And the house?”

“Perfectly clean Travis.....too clean if you ask me. It smacks of being sanitized. It seems unlikely that with all that residue around the village, that the big house would be untouched.”

“Did you enter the house?”

“No, we didn’t want to set off any booby traps that might be in there. We did our scans from the outside, and the three of us used enough power to get the job done. They’re either not there at all, they’ve burrowed underground, or they have wards up that we can’t penetrate. Any of those scenarios makes sense, but I wasn’t willing to try with just the three of us.”

“Did you detect any outside monitoring?”

“ No Minister, the immediate surrounding area seems to be abandoned. The village is a sleepy one, and we were not disturbed by any muggles, or magicals pretending to be muggles. My team put up some Listening Charms, and they took up positions in the graveyard.”

“Good, we will have Herbert’s team relieve them at midnight, I want round the clock surveillance on the house until we’re sure either way. Go back there and await them Sanford, and after you send the rest of your crew home, set up some more Listening Posts around the area. Use your discretion, and don’t attract any muggle attention if you can help it.”

“And if we encounter any Death Eaters?”

“Call it in and immediately go on the defensive, but try to remain in visual contact for as long as possible. We want to capture at least

one if possible, but don't risk getting killed over it, your lives are more important than getting the information."

"Yes sir, it will be done. I'll go collect some provisions and be back to Julius and Karen."

"Good Sanford, I'll have you in for a briefing tomorrow afternoon, I want you to run point on this operation."

"Yes sir." Jenkins departed, and soon the other three went their separate ways. Bones and Scrimgeour went to their homes, while Travis had quick floo conversation with his wife before flooing over to Hogwarts from Rufus' office, one of the very few direct connections with the school.

Dumbledore was not in his office, and Biller decided to go to the Great Hall, not wanting to spend any more time here than necessary. Dinner was just breaking up as the Auror came up to the faculty entrance to the Great Hall. He greeted the teachers that he knew, and saw that Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Lupin were still seated and talking. He quietly walked over to them, his first up close and personal look at Dumbledore since that day at the Academy.

"Headmaster, Minerva, Remus." Dumbledore smiled, giving no indication that he held Harry's outburst against him.

"Hello Travis, to what do we owe the pleasure?" Biller looked over at the student tables, and saw that few were still there, none of them players in our story. He still kept his voice relatively low.

"We have uncovered a traitor within the Ministry." That information gave them a start.

"Who is it?"

"Magdalena Edgecombe, Head of the Floo Registry." Magdalena was a Department Head, one of fifteen, who in order of overall seniority at The Ministry, were the next ones in line to take over as Minister, after, currently, Dumbledore, Bones, Biller, and Diggory.

“She has confessed?”

“No Headmaster, nor has she denied anything. She’s sitting tight in a holding cell until the morning.”

“And you will then break her?” This was Lupin, who knew that such a task was Biller’s specialty.

“No Remus, I have another errand I must attend to. The Minister himself, and Madam Bones will do the honors. You can expect a short trial after her confession.”

“How did you discover her?”

“An anonymous tip Minerva. The Minister felt you should be informed right away Headmaster.” It wasn’t actually right away, but Dumbledore was still being told pretty quickly.

“Thank you Travis, I appreciate you keeping me up to date. May I ask why you will not be doing the interrogation? Surely no errand is more important than this.” That was a good question, not that Travis was interested in giving a straight answer.

“The Minister prefers to handle this himself, perhaps he is nostalgic for some of his old duties sir, I don’t know.” That was barely a vague answer, and everyone knew it, but none of the Hogwarts folk complained, to Biller’s relief.

“Very well, did the Minister have a suggestion on what or when to tell Magdalena’s daughter?” They hadn’t considered that, so Travis made up something on the spot.

“No Headmaster, he is leaving that up to your discretion. If I may make a suggestion, perhaps you should wait until after we have made sure tomorrow. It is not out of the realm that Edgecombe may be stonewalling for other reasons, and has committed other crimes that are not treasonous in nature.”

“I’ll do that Travis, thank you. Was there anything else?”

“I would like a word with Remus for a few moments if you don’t mind.” Remus was finished with his meal anyway, and stood up to follow Biller out.

“Let’s go toward our old Common Room shall we Remus?”

“Fine with me. You want to tell me what’s on your mind Travis?” He looked at his old schoolmate, and had a feeling that it had to do with Harry. Anything to do with his status here, or as a werewolf, would likely be handled by Bones.

“Did Dumbledore tell you about what happened at the Academy?”

“No, but Moody did. I heard that there was a confrontation, but no blows were struck.”

“Very true, though if anyone was looking to fire first it was Moody. That would have been fun, arresting a former Auror for assaulting The Boy Who Lived. That would be pattern making wouldn’t it?” Remus ignored the salvo.

“Why was Harry there with you at the Academy in the first place? I can’t imagine him asking for a guided tour after leaving the country like he did.” The two of them stopped, and Biller gave him a hard look.

“He wanted to ask me about Lily and James.” That wasn’t what Remus was expecting, he delayed for a moment.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“You heard me Remus. Apparently Harry knows little more about them other than that they were named Lily and James, and went to school with you, Black, and the betrayer. Though at least Hagrid got him some pictures of them.”

“What did you tell him?”

“As much as I could in an hour’s time, I had never imagined that you would conspire with that old coot to keep that part of his family life from him. What the hell possessed you and Black to do that?”

“You weren’t there Travis, don’t presume to judge things you know nothing about.” He hadn’t raised his voice, as one never knew where the students would be walking, but there was steel in his voice as he said it. Biller resumed walking, and Remus was resigned to following him.

“I know more than you think Remus, I was friends with them too, Lily and James. And I know I’ve talked to Harry much more than you have in the last few months since he decamped for America.”

“Yes he did, which might explain why I haven’t had a chance to talk with him. I can’t exactly go traipsing around the Great Lakes campus now can I? I would be killed on sight just for tripping the wards!” True enough.

“You had three years Remus! Including one year, if I’m not mistaken, that you not only taught here, but took the time and energy to teach him how to cast a Patronus!” There was no defense to this, and to his credit, Remus did not bother to offer one.

“How mad is he?” Travis very readily told him.

“You’re right above Ron Weasley on his shit list.” Remus sighed, he had been afraid of that. He had thought he was in Harry’s good graces when the first issue of his Chronicle subscription arrived, but apparently not.

“That’s not a good place to be.”

“No it is not. Now you’re way better than Dumbledore on said list, but you need to have a chat with Harry this summer when he comes back to visit. A chat that lasts as long as he bloody wants, and

answers every one of his considerable number of questions.” Remus did not like how this was being presented, and it showed in his response.

“Or else what Travis? Are you ordering me to do this? I wasn’t aware that I fell under your purview.”

“I am speaking not only for myself, but for Rufus Scrimgeour. We are strongly advising you to have this talk with Harry as soon as possible, which we fully acknowledge is not likely to be until summer.” Rufus didn’t really care one way or the other about this, but they had talked about it and he had no problem with Travis using his name to get what he wanted. Remus tried to poke a hole there.

“The Minister cares about a sixteen year old boy’s need for information about his parents?”

“At least somebody does Remus. You and your boss apparently don’t.” That hit home, very hard.

“It’s not like that Travis, it’s really not. May I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“Why do you care so much?” This was asked in a tone of curiousness, not of sarcasm, and Biller answered it as such.

“Because the kid is being driven toward the Death Eaters with every one of Dumbledore’s mistakes. Because his whole life has been a lie. Because the people who should have looked out for him chose not to. Because he came to me and asked me for my help. Can you deny any of that Remus?”

“No I cannot.”

“Then why did you not tell him about his parents?”

“Dumbledore thought it would be too hard on him. He convinced Hagrid, myself, and the others to let the information out gradually, at a pace that Harry could handle . I don’t know what he said to Sirius when he was alive, Padfoot wouldn’t tell me, but he went along with it too. Molly and Arthur decided to break from that, but only after Harry left.” It took another few seconds, but the logic then slammed into place for Biller.

“I keep wondering why you went along with it. Wait a moment. Last week I checked out your file at The Ministry, and the only jobs you’ve held for more than a month in either the magical or muggle world have been right here. Dumbledore’s been supporting you, hasn’t he?”

“Yes he has. Until my inheritance he gave me a monthly stipend to live on, though I insisted it not be so much as to attract attention.”

“And the same for Hagrid, giving him a job here. That’s why he didn’t want Black out of Azkaban, he could easily have ordered him in for Veritaserum questioning, or even arranged for a jailbreak. Remus, what the hell have you people let him do?” They were almost at the Gryffindor Common Room, and the paintings were starting to perk up as they argued.

“Travis, you can disagree with Dumbledore, you can order him off the Dursley lawn and things like that because you have always had Rufus Scrimgeour to hide behind, ever since you left the Auror Academy. Sirius, Hagrid, and I, we have not had that luxury. I have a life because of Albus Dumbledore, a life that would have been denied me by the very people you work for. Now is the man right all of the time? Of course not. Was it a mistake to put Harry with those people? Yes it was, and Minerva and I both told him so more than once. But it’s done now, and we all have to deal with the situation as it is, not as how we wish it would have turned out.”

“You can handle him leaving Black for dead like that?”

“No, and that will be dealt with before my end, if God wills it. There’s the way things are, and there’s the way they ought to be Travis. My sole focuses are the students under my care and the defeat of

Voldemort and his people. I'm sorry about what was done to Harry, and for my part in it, I really am. But I will not wear a hair-shirt or beg him for forgiveness. It's gone past that now, there have been too many mistakes to catalogue." It was said almost as a lament.

"What would Lily and James say if they could hear you now?" Remus now had tears in his eyes, but he managed to keep his voice steady.

"They would kill me Travis, and not waste any time doing so, I doubt they would say a word. And I agree that they would be right to do so. I did chose Dumbledore and myself over their son."

"And Harry?"

"I saw what happened at The Ministry. He's more ruthless than either of us, and then some. That's one reason I'm not eager to talk with him alone, I don't want that temper of his exploding on me, I don't think I could take him in single combat if that rage gets let loose." Travis was suddenly very cold, and if he didn't know better, he would swear that a Dementor was right around the corner.

"You're afraid of him?"

"Aren't you?"

"Not at all, because I've always been straight with him." Remus again sounded sardonic.

"Again, you've had that luxury." They were at the door now.

"Remus, are you refusing to talk to him as I've asked you to?"

"No, I would rather do it willingly than have you and Rufus threaten me into doing it. I know the problems you can cause me. Tell him that if he comes back during his Easter or Summer breaks, I will make as much time as he needs."

“It would be even better if you would do it.”

“All right. I can’t promise that he’ll like every answer though.”

“The truth will satisfy him Remus, and no, I will not provide him with Veritaserum to help things along.”

“I’m sure Fred and George have just as easy access to it as you do.” Biller smiled for the first time in the conversation, and Remus did likewise.

“No doubt. So tell me this: You said that Dumbledore gave you a life, but now you don’t need that assistance anymore. Why still follow him?”

“Who else would I follow? The Ministry won’t take me in, and Harry disdains the war, or at least he claims to. Since I won’t sit it out, that leaves only Dumbledore.” Very true, Biller thought, as most of the anti-werewolf laws were still in place.

“Things are changing over there, for the better.”

“I know they are. Do we have a purpose here at our old stomping grounds?”

“Not really, it was as good a place as any to come to.” Right then, the Fat Lady opened the door, and Ron and Hermione came out, laden down with books, on their way to the library.

“Oh hello Professor Lupin.”

“Hello Hermione, Ron. Off to study I see.”

“We are, loads of tests coming up. You’re Travis Biller aren’t you? I remember you from the Dursleys.” Biller remembered well, these were the best mates of Harry’s that he had to escort off the property before Harry started cursing people right and left. That would be a memory that would stick around for awhile.

“I am Ron, good memory. How is your term going so far?”

“Great, though it’s a long slog until summer now.”

“Keep up the studying, and make sure you take out Hufflepuff in the next game, got to break that losing streak against them.”

“You played?”

“I was a Beater like your brothers, my wife plays for the Harpies.” Ron perked up, and seemed like he wanted to take the conversation further, but Hermione gave him the look, and the two politely went on their way.

“Interesting that we ran into those two in particular.”

“Pure coincidence Remus, though it was good to get a look at them.” They did not go inside, and the two of them walked back to Dumbledore’s office, talking about how the various Defense classes were going. Aurors usually addressed the students in the NEWT years at least twice a term, and the next one was due in a few weeks. Travis would have done it himself, as he had a few times before in previous years, but his days were usually too busy now. As they got to Dumbledore’s front door.

“I’ll send an owl to the twins for Dobby to pick up.”

“Good enough. Just for the record Remus, I wish it didn’t have to happen like this. I don’t enjoy threatening people like that.”

“Me neither. I look forward to hearing what Edgecombe had to say.”

“You and me both Remus.” Though the transcript of that confession would be heavily sanitized. Biller was away a few moments later, home to his wife and his cold dinner. It had been a long day.

The next morning it took about twenty minutes of Veritaserum aided conversation for Edgecombe to spill the fact that she had been working not just for Voldemort recently, but for Lucius Malfoy for over ten years, being his inside contact, and arranging all sorts of illicit floo connections for him and his associates. The Aurors rolled up those connections and managed over a dozen arrests, though none of the men and women taken into custody had Dark Marks on their arms. After some drug assisted questioning, again led by Rufus himself, they all confessed to being members of Malfoy's intelligence and financial network. The Death Eaters were struck a minor blow, and Rufus considered it a job well done. The ten were given quick trials and thrown into Azkaban with 15 year terms apiece.

Travis spent an uncomfortable hour with Robert Marr, gently coaxing him into talking about his tracking virus, though they only got to that in the last few minutes. Marr, as Cusick had told them, was on the downward slope to recovery, and was somewhat verbose. He could not recall the exact formula, but was lucid enough to assure his old schoolmate that he would get right on it once he was back at work, as he had enough of it left in his mind that he felt sure that he could reconstruct it.

"How long do I still have to be here? I know they've told me, but I can't seem to remember."

"Cusick said a couple more weeks, and you'll be sprung from here."

"It's hard Travis, so hard. I know.....I know those visions aren't real, I just can't help it." Biller was a hard man most of the time, but this was slowly breaking him, and he stood up to leave.

"You're doing better Robert, everyone only wants what's best for you."

"I know, I know. I just don't think I can face coming back here again. I think I need to be Obliviated the next time you send me back." The 'you' meant The Ministry, and that could be arranged, though Evie Marr would have something to say about it.

“Good luck Robert, I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.”

“Thanks for coming Travis, I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“It’s okay, we’ll get you all the help you need when you come back.” He patted Marr on the shoulder, and walked out. Sarah and her crew were waiting for him, having been briefed on the way upstairs. Travis leaned up against the wall and closed his eyes, the last two days had taken a lot out of him, and it wasn’t over yet.

“Are you okay Travis?”

“No I’m really not Sarah.” He walked away slowly, and the others had little option but to follow him.

Fudge would remain as a guest of the Australian Ministry for the rest of the month, as Travis sent Westbrook, Graham, and Stiles back Down Under to set up the wards on Fudge’s house. Sarah went with pages of questions, and spent time every day milking everything she could out of her former Minister.

Monday, January 20, 1997

Transfiguration Classroom A

10:30 am EDT

Harry concentrated as hard as he could, and pointed his wand at the feather in front of him.

“Commutatus Dispando”

The feather turned into a small throw pillow. The exercise was to take one element and expand on it and multiply it as much as possible, while also conjuring a container for it. Warrick had taken a few drops of water and turned them into a two liter of Coke, and drinkable, as they tested out right afterward.

“Turning water into Coke, you’re a genius Warrick.”

“And it wasn’t even New Coke.”

“What’s New Coke?” Harry had missed that little craze, and Warrick threw him a mock sigh..

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll explain it later. It’s like I’m your second Muggle Studies teacher here, though at least you pay attention, I’ll give you that much.” Harry ‘accidentally’ nudged Warrick, spilling some of the Coke.

“Oh quit your complaining, you’re doing better at this than I am aren’t you?” Harry’s pillow was really good though, and he made sure to take it with him after class. Still, Transfiguration was Warrick’s best subject, and he was currently ranked number one in the class, right ahead of Harry, in the race to be promoted to Advanced Charms the next year. Harry wasn’t too concerned with it though, he liked Washburn a lot, and knew that both of them were scheduled to stay for the summer session this year.

“I’m allowed to better at you in something you know.” He was just kidding, and had a smirk on his face when he said it, there were no Ron signs here.

“You stomped me in our Potions OWL didn’t you?”

“Okay, two things. Couldn’t my little cousins stomp you in Potions though?”

“I’ll ignore that.....and how about being a Beater, which I don’t do well, and playing football.....err, soccer, better at all those things.”

“Ok, Ok, you’ve massaged my ego enough for today thank you, never mind that you could kill me by flinching.”

“Not a talent that one uses every day unfortunately.”

“Too bad for you. Let’s switch, you make us some pop, and I’ll get a blanket going. I’ll take it and your pillow the next time I’m with Reiko.” Harry didn’t look at him, but deadpanned:

“In the basement.” Warrick gave him a sideways glance as he took aim at his feather.

“I knew that you knew, I guess I should thank you for not terrorizing us down there yet.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Sophie. I was all set to have fun with you two after the dance, that’s when I first bothered to find out where you sneak off to.”

“I’m sure Sophie distracted you quite well.” Harry resisted the urge to smile at Warrick’s tone of voice.

“She did, she showed me that there were more fun things to do than flood you and Reiko with cold water.”

“You wouldn’t.” No he wouldn’t really, but Warrick didn’t have to know that.

“Ice water my friend, think hypothermia.” He was making this up as he went along.

“I could get you too, I have access to the trunk just like you do.” Warrick and Harry were the only ones with total trunk access, in that they were the only ones who could easily enter their dorm room. The others could call out for Dobby or Winky to let them in, but if those two weren’t available, and they only popped immediately for Harry or the twins, then they had to wait.

“You can try, but if you interrupt us at anything important…….” Warrick had just turned his feather into what could charitably be called a napkin. Changing it back was much easier, and he gave it another go.

“How important might we be talking about?”

“Wouldn’t you and a ton of other gossip hounds like to know?” And they would, Harry and Sophie were much speculated on by those who enjoyed gossiping. Harry himself would throw out a few false leads for them, just for amusement purposes, and listen in delight as they took the Quaffle and ran with it. They still hadn’t figured it out though, and Harry’s stories were slowly building up in their outlandishness.

“So you two still aren’t having sex eh?” Harry had no trouble admitting this to Warrick or Jonas, and at least Drew hadn’t asked yet.

“I’m in no hurry mate, no need to apply pressure when it isn’t necessary.”

“You Brits, so gentlemanly.”

“The accent is what hooked her mate, don’t underestimate it.”

“I figured it had to be something off the wall. In heels she’s about as tall as you are, so it’s not your commanding presence.” Harry had somehow made Diet Coke from his thimble of water, though again it tasted like the real thing.

“Sophie doesn’t wear heels, I mean how long have you known her and you haven’t noticed this?”

“Whatever.”

“Just because you’re a foot taller than your girlfriend.”

“Hey, I’ve dated tall women before.”

“Like who?”

“You’ve seen Shannon, from Shawnee.”

“Claudia’s roommate?” Shannon Rutherford was indeed much taller than Reiko, and in fact did wear heels quite often.

“Yeah, I hadn’t had my growth spurt when I was with her, so I only had her by a couple of inches.”

“Oh really? How’d that work out for you?” Harry had managed Sprite this time, though it was a bit weak, soda fountain weak. Warrick had now turned his feather into a duster, he changed it back and decided to give it one more shot.

“Not too well, I don’t know how Claudia manages to put up with her. It was a long six weeks I don’t mind telling you.” Let’s see you take on Cho Chang, Harry thought with a grimace.

“She is very direct I’ve noticed.” Claudia was cordial with her roommates, but when she was not with the gang, she still did not turn to them for companionship very often. Harry got along with all three in the very limited time he was ever around them.

“You have no earthly idea Harry.”

“And I would just as soon keep it that way.” It was Dr. Pepper with this batch, and Harry was half annoyed that he couldn’t make Coke, and half impressed that he seemingly could make everything else. Warrick finally had a comforter, on his fifth try, with a nice plaid pattern to boot. Wash came over to check up on them.

“How’re you guys doing?” Warrick beamed at him.

“Good Professor, I’m getting the hang of this.” He showed off his comforter, and Wash sampled the Coke. Everyone in the room was doing different things, some were using pieces of wood to make furniture, something Palmer had painstakingly worked Harry through over the summer. Others were using metal or bits of plastic. The two Marauders were sticking to things that they would use.

“How about you Harry?”

“I’m getting there sir, I’ve got a nice pop machine going so far.” Wash took another sip.

“I do love Dr. Pepper. Any questions guys?”

“No sir.”

“Okay, you only have a few minutes left and you can take off. Remember your papers are due Wednesday.” Warrick was done with his, and Harry had resisted temptation to use his Reiko present, and was mostly done. He had the afternoon off though, and would do it then, it was always nice to start the week with an easy day, as Wash did not stretch them too much. As they left the classroom, Warrick looked over at his roommate.

“We need to prank someone soon, we’re letting the Map go to waste.” Harry was in agreement there, he had been talking with Sophie on who to target next.

“I’m always open to suggestions, as long as it isn’t Clancy.” Warrick was surprised.

“Are you that afraid of Heyman? He’s not protecting him anymore you know.”

“That’s what bothers me mate, if we go after Joe again it will just be six against one, and that’s.....well I just don’t like how that looks.” A belated response to be sure, as Warrick quickly pointed out.

“Easy for you to say, you didn’t have to deal with him for five years.” No he didn’t, and Harry was often very thankful for that. At least with Draco Malfoy he didn’t have to share a room with him.

“And thanks to me showing up, and the chairs, you’ve been spared his company for over four months.”

“I think I’ve been appropriately grateful.”

“Yes you have. You know, now that I think about it, I think we’re being set up.” Warrick looked at him in surprise.

“By who? Clancy?”

“No, Heyman. He took the pink thing way too well, and that whole backing us over Clancy thing smells just a little bit. I think he’s daring us to look like the bullies against Joe, but he’s making it so obvious that we would be sure to see it, and thus not do anything more to him as a result.” Warrick’s head was spinning at that convoluted logic, but after Harry repeated himself word for word, he got it.

“You need to become a lawyer dude.”

“It’s my Ravenclaw side coming out, but I think I’ll say no to seven more years of school.”

“You’re really not coming to college with us next year? Even Jonas is going to take a couple of classes now.” Jonas’ holdout had ended that morning, as he sent in his registration fee for the SAT, which was about two more months away. Harry himself felt so ill prepared for them that he was not even going to bother, though he was a little surprised that Sophie had not pushed him harder. He had a feeling that she had registered him for them anyway.

“Well not as a student anyway, I’ll rent us a house near whatever campus you guys pick out.” Warrick mentally figured that if Sophie couldn’t convince him into matriculating, then no one could.

“Anyway, back to pranking. We have to do something.”

“I’m with you, don’t worry. But who, that’s the question.”

“Maybe we should revisit Poole, like Reiko wants.” Harry didn’t like the direction this was heading, and quickly tried to quash it.

“No, we don’t want to do that. He’s harmless enough, I hardly ever see him.” Warrick looked at him, they had just gotten to the Lounge.

“Don’t tell me, you’ve made an arrangement with him, haven’t you?” Harry gave him a look that clearly said ‘not so bloody loud with that subject in front of other people you gump’.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because he hasn’t said boo to any of us since you got here, and he doesn’t exactly love Jonas and me. How much is he costing you? \$100 a week?”

“\$200 a month actually.” Warrick was half pissed, half amused.

“You bastard. For how long? When did you set this up?”

“About a week before the trial. You were.....where were you now that I think about it? Well I went down to his basement lair and we quickly struck a deal. He’s not a bad guy really.”

“I’m sure he loves your wallet.”

“Being rich has its advantages, for all of us.” Warrick couldn’t argue there, the trunks alone were proof of that.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I didn’t want you and Jonas going ape with it, that’s why I’ve delayed. And I was going to tell you when serious talk of pranking him came up. So let’s scotch that, he’s an employee of WWW and thus is out of bounds.”

“Fair enough, I was never too hot on the idea anyway, not with Murray and Heyman onto us like they are. I take it we can’t prank either of them?”

“Well leaving aside that I’m not your boss and you can do whatever you wish.....I wouldn’t prank either of them with a ten foot pole, and you shouldn’t either. They both like me, protect me, and give some sage advice when called for.....I’m not risking that for a few giggles.”

“That still doesn’t alleviate our need for a target now does it? You keep eliminating all the good ones. I agree we can’t target individuals too much, but c’mon.”

“I’m much more cautious than I was as a younger man Warrick. How about Jonas’ other roommates?” Drew was not in the Map mix yet, though Harry was one more chess game away from telling his friend to start thinking about a nickname. There was a sense of sanity about Drew that Harry found incredibly refreshing. The other roommates were alright guys to most people, but resented both Jonas, for his Quodpot fame, and Drew, for being light years more gifted than they were. They had disliked Harry immediately for much the same reasons, though he had not considered them to be possible targets until now, preferring to deal with Clancy and his Hogwarts foes. Harry spent practically no time in the Jefferson Lounge or Jonas’ room, so he rarely saw them. Warrick didn’t like them on principle.

“That’s a thought, but won’t they suspect Jonas?”

“We’ll do another booby trap on his and Drew’s things, I’m sure the pink thing would work for trunks.”

“That was inspired yeah. Are you going to put Drew in the Map?”

“Where do you stand on that?”

“I’m fine with it, and so is Reiko, we talked about it the other night. What does Sophie think?”

“She’s cool with it too, I was going to wait until Chess Club to talk to him about it, but if we’re going to prank his roommates we should probably do it today.” They put their books away, and slowly started

ambling toward the Dining Hall as they hashed this out. Harry had all day now, he was done with classes, and Warrick rarely ate much before Potions. Warrick had a thoughtful look on his face.

“What are we going to do though? It should be elegant, and non-destructive.”

“We should do something to the showerhead or the toilet. Then it looks like we’re pranking all four, and Drew and Jonas won’t be suspects.”

“Right, they can use our room to do that stuff, or the one off their Lounge. It can’t be pink though.” Harry addressed something that had been nagging at him for weeks.

“I know, I’m kind of mad that we wasted that on Clancy now that I think about it. It has a lot of potential if we do it right. I already mailed the charm cocktail recipe to Neville, so that Ron doesn’t go through his things again.” Neville had Dobby’d back that the charm cocktail was in place, but that he and Ron were starting to get along better, and it looked like it might not be needed.

“Make sure he gets pictures. We could make it so that it removes all their hair. Can you come up with something for that?”

“I’m sure I can find something. Mark and Lester bald, that does have some comedic possibilities.”

“I’m bald you know.”

“You wear it well though.”

“Lots of famous bald people out there you know.”

“Some of them even involuntarily too.”

“It’s a sign of distinction, of class. Lot’s of talented and famous ones.”

“I’ll give you five bucks right now if you don’t ever start naming them where I can hear you.” Warrick started laughing, and mockingly put out his palm.

“Reiko likes how it looks, so that’s all I’m concerned about. What about you? You ever going to get a haircut?”

“Nah, too much like work, trying to figure a charm to keep it cut. My hair likes it the way things are thank you very much, and it doesn’t much care what I think. Hey, how bout instead of making them bald, we make it so that their hair grows like crazy.”

“Like that gum the twins put out?” Harry had forgotten about that for a moment, they needed at least some deniability.

“Yeah, damn it, we can’t do it then. Let’s stick with the bald thing. I’ll research it while you guys are at class, and after I get my Transfiguration paper finished.” They said little during lunch, not wanting to get anyone’s hopes up. Harry asked Drew to come by with the others after class, as there were some things he needed to show him.

After lunch Harry first went to the roof to visit his plants. Neville had sent him seeds for two different plants in his Christmas parcel. One was a plant whose extract was meant to help one’s eyesight. No it wasn’t carrots, but a magical plant found only in the Canary Islands, it produced a syrup that could be stirred in milk and drank. One of Neville’s uncles had come back with it, and it was supposed to be very effective. Despite its place of origin, it could grow in any non-polar climate, and the plants seemed to be thriving on the roof, even with the snow. Harry was used to his glasses after all these years, but the chance to ditch them was too good to pass up. The other plant was one from China, that was used for enhancing memory, and was diluted greatly and used in the muggle pills Ginkgo Biloba and Echinacea. This was the pure stuff though, and Neville said it was doing great things for him already. Harry had told Murray about the plants before he put them up, so she or any faculty members wouldn’t wonder what he was doing up on the roof a few times a week. He had

them under multiple Notice-Me-Not charms, and also the Pink cocktail, so far they had not been disturbed. It would be another month or so before he could harvest anything from them, and he was only going to distribute it to his friends, no selling.

After completing his homework, it took Harry about half an hour in his library to find a Hair Removal Charm that would work how they wanted it to. He had been a little bit worried, as a few of his better Charms books were in Oklahoma with Karl and Lisa. Indeed Karl was doing some of his lectures out of one of them, all the other copies were in private collections like Harry's. He also found one that caused a person to give off certain odors, and even better, in the next book he paged through, there was a very intricate charm that could change the magical residue of spells, though not any major ones, it wasn't strong enough to do that. He was still engrossed in that same book when the other six came down the ladder. Sophie sat down next to him on the couch, with the others taking stock of the books he had been perusing, he looked up with a start. Sophie pulled the book in Harry's lap over so she could see it.

"So Mark and Lester are getting it huh?" Harry gave an irritated look at Warrick.

"I hope someone practiced some discretion when talking about stuff like that?"

"Keep your pants on boy, I know what I'm doing."

"I sure hope so. Anyway, I have what we need, but first things first. Accio Map." The Map was in its usual place on the desk, and flew right to his hand.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." The Map revealed itself, and Drew, who was pretty quiet in the first place, didn't know quite what to say. He saw the names scrawl themselves on the top: Madmartigan, Prongs, Magician, Quicksilver, Cherlindrea, and Half Pint. He knew what most of the names meant in real life, though not who they were in regards to this.

“What the.....what is this?”

“It’s The Marauder’s Map II. Our little guide to Great Lakes. Take a look.” He did, and saw all the dots that represented people and where they were. He pointed his wand at the room they were in, and the dots of the seven of them enlarged.

“How long have you had this?”

“I started making it my first night here back in August. The original is for Hogwarts, and my Dad and his friends put it together almost 20 years ago. Fred and George wound up with it, and showed it to me about three years ago to help me sneak out of school, Neville has it now.” Drew, who had been in Colorado and Boston during the holiday, was the only one in the room who had not met the Brits.

“No wonder you haven’t had a detention since you got here. I’m guessing Murray and Heyman don’t know about this little toy of yours.”

“No they most certainly do not, and that’s how it’s going to stay. The six names on there belong to us, and we’ve decided that it’s time there was a seventh. So start thinking of a name, so we can add it to the list.” The week before, Harry had inoculated Drew against becoming pink, the other boy having already returned home before they did the door. Drew was examining the Map, and distractedly asked:

“What’s this about Mark and Lester?”

“Well I’m already re-thinking that. I want to hit your whole House.” Warrick goggled at him, and Drew was jerked out of his reverie, Warrick burst out:

“You want to make them all bald? That’s a big target.”

“The trick is, not to get everyone at once, so people can’t figure out what’s going on until it’s too late.”

“Are you getting all convoluted on us again dude?”

“Yes Warrick, I am. It’s called cleverness, and I’m doing it just to irritate you.”

“Well as long as there’s a good reason for it. What do you have in mind?”

“Jonas, Drew, how often would you say that the Lounge bathrooms are used?” Each Lounge had two, one for each sex, with a couple of toilets and a like number of sinks for those too lazy to go to their own rooms, or for visitors from other Houses. Jonas answered him.

“Beats me, there always seems to be someone in there though, at least when I use them. Drew?”

“The same, though I make a point not to use them, some of the younger kids aren’t too sanitary. What do you have in mind?”

“I want to load up the sinks and the toilet flush handles with our little charms. I found a masking spell that we can deploy too, so an initial inspection won’t give us away. The kids will touch the handles, and anytime they play with their hair.....presto. We’ll put a delaying charm on it as well, so it doesn’t act right away. I’ve also come up with a smell charm we can use on another House, using the same dispersal method. Debate?” They were all thinking about this, and Reiko thought of a problem.

“This hair loss thing, can it easily be fixed? With an anonymous donation of a particular charm?” Fixed? Where was the fun in that, Harry wondered.

“We could probably come up with something, why?”

“Valentine’s Day Harry. We can’t have dozens of bald Jefferson girls right before a big dance like that. Even if we did it today, that’s not a

lot of time to grow long hair you know.” Harry genuinely had not thought of that.

“Duly noted, and I agree that we have to take that into account. Either that or just target the guys, we want to be comedians, not villains. Sophie, what do you think?”

“The smell thing works on the same principles? We would do it the same way? How long would it last?”

“It does work the same way, and we can make it last as long as we want to. I’m thinking make it last a couple of days, any longer would be overkill.”

“Then we should do that one right away, and wait until the day after Valentine’s Day to do the hair one. Doing that would show that we took it into account, and aren’t totally malicious.”

“Yes it would. Claudia?”

“I’m all for it, especially with the masking charm. Are we just doing Jefferson?”

“You want to include Shawnee? Or do it instead?”

“Well Proctor is out, since we don’t have ready access there, and I think it would be too obvious if Cortez was tagged.”

“Our man Ray won’t be cooperative?” Ray Elwood in fact had not been sniffing around since everyone got back from vacation, but Harry still liked giving Claudia the needle about it from time to time.

“Don’t start Harry.”

“Yes ma’am. Let’s do the smell thing for Jefferson, and then we’ll do the bald or something else for Shawnee. Drew?”

“Are we just keeping it between the seven of us?”

“Hopefully, why?”

“Then we have to be really careful about which one of the women here sneaks into the bathroom. Late at night would probably do the trick, and either Jonas or I could do the other one.”

“Couldn’t you sneak into the ladies’ room yourselves?” Drew shook his head.

“Not worth the risk if we got caught, there are often people in there even at 3:00 am. That’s a bad thing to get caught doing, the potential alone would get a detention from Heyman. He’s very proper about such things.” Harry started laughing:

“In other words, people have been caught doing the wild thing in there.” Everyone started laughing.

“Three times last term alone.” Everyone looked at Jonas, and even Drew was grinning.

“Hey now, don’t look at me like that, you’d have heard about it by now if I was that careless. Doing it in a bathroom, I have higher standards than that.”

“We’ll get a poll going on that one and get back to you. The smell thing it is then, any preferences on which one we do?” Reiko threw one out:

“I suppose a skunk would be too cliché?”

“Sometimes the old ones are the best ones. Claudia, you’ll be smelling it most, which one do you prefer?” She was shaking her head about one thing though:

“Claudia is going to be bunking with Reiko and Sophie thank you very much. Miranda’s bed is always empty anyway. I say we use the smell of feet, it should be easy to obtain, and will throw a lot of people

off. How hard is this going to be to do?" Harry had that spell bookmarked, and slid the book to the middle of his coffee table. They crowded around it, except for Harry and Drew.

"Are you cool with this kind of thing mate? If not, it's no problem."

"I'm cool with it Harry, this kind of thing sounds like fun. Now just because you're letting me in on all this, doesn't mean I'll cut you a break at Wizard Chess."

"This summer I'm going to have you take on Ron, then you'll get a challenge. I'll stick to trying to beat Nan Mahon, I almost had her last week." Drew raised his eyebrows, Nan was worth having in more ways than one. Harry played her quite a lot, and had even solicited some tips for Sophie type things. They rarely interacted outside of the club, but were solid friends on Tuesday nights.

"Get your mind out of the gutter there buddy, she's a bit too young for any of us in here." Nan Mahon was a Sophomore, and was coming up on her 14th birthday. Harry didn't want to give Jonas any ideas though, she was that good looking, so he kept his voice low during that part of the conversation.

"I didn't say a thing. I don't know about this Ron thing though, he doesn't seem like the nicest guy from everything you guys have told me."

"Teenagers are at an awkward stage in life you know."

"Thank you Doctor Harry."

"Anytime Drew. So you got any ideas on a name yet?"

"Can I have more than four minutes to think of some? You've hit me with a lot here."

"I've gotten that before."

“I’m sure you have.” They rejoined the others, and Harry felt the need to say something else.

“I need to tell you all something, well most of you at least. Back in September, right before I left for the trial, I came to an agreement with Riley Poole and put him on the WWW payroll.” Jonas didn’t look a bit surprised, the opposite reaction of Claudia and Reiko. Nothing surprised Drew in here anymore. Claudia looked like she was going to be ill.

“Why did you do that? Poole of all people?”

“Has he hassled any of us since then?”

“Well.....no he hasn’t now that I think about it. I can’t believe I didn’t notice something.”

“Then it has been money well spent.”

“Still, bribing Poole.” Claudia was clearly torn between morals and convenience.

“I decided that it was best to cover my skinny little ass as much as possible. I did it to ensure a smooth road for pranks and anything we might be up to. He knows that if any of us do anything really heinous, or violent, then the deal is off and he can go sic one or more of the faculty on us.” Reiko looked at him and shook her head, now laughing.

“Did you do that with that Filch guy at Hogwarts?”

“No, and I could kick myself for not thinking of it years ago. I don’t know if he would have amenable to it, but I should have tried. I should have thrown some money around a long time ago, life would have been a lot simpler for me if I had. Now back to business. Ladies, who is our volunteer for Jefferson bathroom duty?” None of the three seemed eager to do it, but eventually Reiko nodded her head.

“I’ll do it, I’ll sneak over there sometime tonight. Who’s going to meet me? And when?”

“I’ll do it Reiko, I need to get some firsthand pranking experience if I’m going to be a Marauder. I’ve changed my tune about when as well, just come over tonight and we’ll all hang out in the Lounge, then it couldn’t possibly look like any of us are sneaking around.” Jonas had a thought.

“Well if we’re doing this in plain sight, I’ll be the one to do the bathroom stuff, since people know you don’t like to use them.”

“Good point. Let’s make copies for all of us of what the charms are, and in what order they need to be placed. Jonas, Drew, do you want the Pink cocktail put on your stuff, just in case?” Both of them shrugged. Jonas answered first.

“I wouldn’t mind it being put on my trunk, I doubt those two would try anything, but you can never be too careful. Drew?”

“I agree, but we should casually talk about it in front of them, just to make sure that there is no misunderstanding about it. They know what happened to Clancy, and I think they’re already worried that they’re the next targets.”

“They don’t like that we’ve finally become friends, I know that much.”

“That’s what they’re most worried about, they somehow have thought that they benefited from us not being close buddies. You know, the idea of getting them is more appealing by the minute.” Drew was not a vengeful person by nature, but he had seen the fun to be had after watching Harry’s Howler campaign, and the success of the Pink defense. He had, at Harry’s urging, contributed a Howler last November, and had come up with his own blistering tirade toward Zacharias Smith, who he only knew as a jerk in a few of Harry’s stories.

“Yeah, let’s see how they react when we talk about the Pink in front of them, and we can see how the land lies. At the very least we can use some of those cherry bombs from the Halloween Party, they can get dowsed in the toilet.” That certainly would be smelly. Reiko was scribbling down the Charms they needed to use, it wound up being four separate charms: two for the smelling part, one for the delay, and one for the masking.

“This is pretty complicated stuff.”

“Good thing we’re all Charms experts isn’t it? Are we all agreed to doing it tonight?”

“Works for me, how long do we want to set the delay for?” Reiko asked, and Drew threw his penny in.

“I’m thinking of at least a day, and none of us can be in the Lounge tomorrow night if we do it like that. Tomorrow night we’ll hang out in here or in Cortez.” Sophie had one thing to add.

“Harry, make sure that Dobby and Winky are somewhere else tomorrow as well. Heyman must know that we used them in Clancy’s room.”

“I’m sure he does, but suspecting and knowing are two different animals.” They all went up to dinner, which went smoothly until the end, when Murray stood up to make an announcement.

“I need your attention for a moment please.” The room settled down almost instantly, and the students all turned to look at her.

“This morning there was an official declaration of war by the Lycans against the Kindred and against the Magical world. This followed a skirmish last night in which five Lycans were killed in combat by Kindred Brujah clan enforcers in San Francisco. It was not the first skirmish between the two forces, but the Lycans apparently took this one more seriously. This will all be in The Chronicle tomorrow morning, but it was felt by the powers that be that you should be told now. It is important to understand that everything here will remain as

it always has been. There are anti-Lycan wards covering every square inch of the building and the school grounds, so outside activities, when they resume anyway, will not be affected. One small thing: if any of you venture outside for a snowball fight or something of that nature, let a Senior in your House know ahead of time. You are not asking permission, just giving a heads up. If there are any questions, please see any of the faculty before or after class, or come talk to myself or Professor Heyman. Thanks for your attention, enjoy the rest of your evening.” She sat back down, and nonchalantly finished her dessert, her husband was making a relatively rare appearance, and now everyone understood why.

The room buzzed with conversation for the rest of the meal, as all the tables seemed to be talking about. Harry was thought by many students to be an expert on Lycans, since word had trickled out about his ‘friendship’ with Remus Lupin, which in reality was on and off, though currently back on since he received the letter that Biller had forced Remus to write. He always told those students the truth though: He didn’t know anymore about Lycans than they did, and probably a lot less, since they had grown up with the Lycan threat and he hadn’t. Harry had found out more about them from Josh Lyman than he had from Remus, though he would pick the man’s brain if their summertime talk went off as planned, and Harry doubted it would in truth. He knew that Biller had planned to talk to Remus about it, and suspected that some blatant coercion had gone on.

The gang hung out in the Jefferson Lounge that night, and endured a night of watching Hellraiser movies, as the Freshmen had their movie night that evening. The youngest three years got control of the three televisions for two nights each a month, with the older four rotating days otherwise. It was a somewhat complex system, run by the Seniors, but it had been refined enough over the last couple of decades, and few complained. Well not until the younger years picked some half-ass movies to watch that is. Hellraiser was the one that the gang could agree to watch, as the other two televisions had a Highlander marathon, and a volley of Disney movies, both of which had some objections from at least two gang members.

During the carnage, Jonas casually slipped off and loaded up the sinks and the toilet handles in the Lounge bathroom; thirty minutes

later, Reiko did the same. They put a 36 hour time delay on the spells, and thankfully were not disturbed during their work, which took about five minutes apiece. The gang stayed through two movies, grimacing all the while, before Jonas and Drew decamped to their room to get some work done. As their 'sponsors' had now left, the other five went back to their own rooms. Harry and Sophie allowed Warrick and Reiko to use the trunk, as they genuinely did have some studying they wanted to do.

The time delay used meant that it was lunchtime on Wednesday before anyone noticed the effects, as Tuesday users of the infected bathrooms did not know how lucky they had it. It was a couple of Novices that got hit first, though they didn't seem to realize it until their afternoon class, when others made comments about their odor. Jonas and Reiko had talked for a few minutes right before the deed, and both put roughly the same amount of 'oomph' into the odor part of the spells, so that both boys and girls were equally affected. The cocktail only affected those who used the infected bathrooms, as more and more students by the end of Wednesday were starting to give off some ripeness. To the delight of the gang, a few non-Jefferson students were getting caught in the web, as they had friends in the infected House and were using it's facilities. By Thursday lunch, over 35 students were smelling rather badly, and the gang, now seven strong, had an impromptu meeting before the meal. Warrick led off:

"This is going too well to keep it limited, I say we hit the other Houses right now."

"And Proctor?"

"Harry, you really can't break into their Lounge? Can't Dobby just let one of us in?" Harry vehemently shook his head.

"I am not risking that Warrick, not only would it be foolhardy with the possibility that one of over 80 people might catch us, but the punishment far outweighs the reward. Claudia, I think you need to have a quick conversation with our man Ray. Evidence or not, every

nitwit in this school is going to suspect us before too long, so its not like it'll be a scoop for him to find out." Claudia delayed for a beat.

"You see him as much as I do."

"I didn't have a date with him though, now did I? Or did it end on bad terms?" Claudia had shared no dirty details, though she and Ray had not been together when Harry and Sophie had looked at the Map that night. Claudia refused to address the subject directly.

"I still think you should do it Harry, use some of that WWW charm on him." That said everything as far as Harry was concerned. Ray was in Advanced Charms, and Harry decided to talk to him during class, if there happened to be any non-lecture time.

"Fine, then you pick a guy not named Harry and quick go load up Shawnee before lunch."

"Deal, c'mon Drew, you've never been in our Lounge before I'm betting." The look on Drew's face was priceless, but he allowed himself to be led back up the ladder. Warrick looked at Harry.

"Chicken."

"Hey, I have to do the Ray convincing don't I? It'll be good for Drew, put some hair on his chest. Warrick, you and Sophie go load up the sinks here. It'll look too suspicious if you and Reiko go together."

"And you're saving me for Proctor."

"Someone has to use the bathroom there." They broke up and headed back up to the Lounge. Ten minutes later, they were eating spaghetti in the Dining Hall, all Houses but Proctor done. Harry waited until Ray and his friends were about to leave the Dining Hall, and then called over to him.

"Hey Ray, a word?" The other boy nodded, and Harry walked over to meet him.

“So how’re things?” Ray smiled, knowing that Harry wanted something from him.

“Fine thanks Harry, what’s up?” Harry hesitated for a moment, allowing Ray’s friends to get a little further away.

“Well officially there is a screw-up in your latest WWW order, though not really.” Ray couldn’t help but laugh.

“And unofficially?”

“I would like your help with a project that we’re working on.” He looked at Harry curiously.

“Don’t tell me that the smelling like feet thing is your handiwork?”

“Is that a common suspicion?”

“Not really, the rumor going around my House is that it seems to be some Freshman in Jefferson with an older brother who taught him the trick. We’ve heard that someone was bragging about it anyway.” Harry was torn here: he wanted to go punch that Freshman out for taking credit for his idea, but on the other hand: deniability, deniability, deniability. One could never have too much of that.

“Well that’s interesting. Anyway, we would like you to assist us by doing a few minutes work in your House.”

“So you did do it.” Harry adopted an innocent look on his face.

“I admit to nothing, but we would like your help all the same. We don’t know anyone in your House better than we do you, and this kind of seems like it would be up your alley.” They were almost at their classroom now. Ray had already decided anyway, he knew that if he became an associate member of the gang, lot’s of cool and fun opportunities would flow his way.

“All right, I’m in. Get me the recipe you used and I’ll do it after class.”

“Terrific, Reiko will come with you back to Proctor, she has the cocktail.” Ray looked momentarily insulted.

“You trust me to do the gig, but not to see the charms?” Well yeah, but Harry figured it wouldn’t be a good idea to say that flat out, besides, he had a good reason anyway.

“Oh no, it’s because of where they’re placed, you need a guy and a girl.” It hit Ray just then.

“You’re using the bathrooms? That’s tricky dude.”

“I have my moments. You’re in?”

“You bet.” They went inside, and went through class without any difficulties, and with a non-stop interactive lecture by Professor Maloney, who did a thing on multiple-person Charms, where at least two people were needed to cast the spells properly. Harry found this so fascinating that he quite forgot about the Smell Project, and during pauses in the demonstration he was trying to think of which of his personal library books might have some spells like this on them. There just wasn’t enough time in the day, though he was very thankful that he only had five classes. After class, he hung around with a couple of other, non-gang, students and talked about the concept with Maloney for a little while. This gave him cover for the loading up of Proctor, though that didn’t occur to him until later.

After class, Ray and Reiko started animatedly talking about a Potions assignment they were going to help each other on, and they walked up to Proctor together to get Ray’s notes on it. The deed was done a few minutes later, and the two of them really did talk about Potions for a little while in the Lounge, as their paper was due the following week. Reiko soon reported back that their work was a success, though she had not been able to get anything out of Ray about Claudia. They all discussed the Jefferson rumors that Ray had mentioned, but neither Jonas nor Drew had heard them, though Jonas would do some

checking at Quodpot practice that evening in the workout room. Claudia felt that she had no choice but ask Harry a certain question:

“Harry, did you arrange for that Freshman to start bragging like that?” He supposed he couldn’t blame her for asking.

“Nope, I don’t even know who it is. I’m glad it’s happening though, it’ll throw people off the trail.” She let it drop after that, satisfied that Harry would lie to them. He would withhold things though, and Claudia had decided to query him more if she felt the need. Drew had one more thing to add.

“I’ve been thinking about a name, and I have one: Kilroy.” Only Reiko ever heard the name before, as he dad liked that kind of music.

“From the Styx song?”

“It is, it’s obscure enough, but it sounds cool. Are we going to start signing our work?”

“Eventually, let’s get some experience first, we don’t want to get caught right away and lose our anonymity from the off.” Harry went right over to the Map and put Drew into it. It now read:

Messrs Madmartigan, Prongs, Magician, and Kilroy, in concert with Misses Quicksilver, Cherlindrea, and Half Pint present to you the Marauder’s Map II

That night, the tally was at around 45 or so, with most of the newbies being in the Houses just hit. It was easy to tell who was who, because the non-smelling folk wanted no part of eating with the infected ones, and a few magical barriers were being set up around the tables. Strangely, the faculty, who could certainly smell the offenders, were doing nothing about it. Their lectures, for the bigger classes anyway, put them far enough away that they couldn’t easily smell the kids. Likewise Murray and Heyman had not approached any of them. This made Harry in particular nervous.

After Chess Club, where a distracted Harry got stomped by Nan Mahon and beaten soundly by Drew, the gang met in the trunk. Jonas had an idea he wanted to discuss.

“Okay, first, I talked with some people on the team about the smelling. Our braggart is a kid named Dan Burton. It seems that he only told a couple of the Novices, trying to look cool, but they in turn told everyone who would listen.” Warrick was pacing around.

“What should we do about him?” Everyone looked at Harry, who was Prankster-in-Charge.

“Absolutely nothing, let him take the heat, if there is any heat. What we need to decide now is whether to stop the campaign or let it go on a little longer.”

“Why would we stop it? It’s working just like we wanted it to?”

“That’s the issue, it’s worked, and we haven’t gotten any heat for it for some reason. I think we should take the stuff off the bathrooms and revel in our victory while we still can. Plus, there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Sophie, I’m really get sick of smelling feet. Even the barriers aren’t helping enough.” They all started laughing. Reiko looked at him.

“Well I’m with you there, but I say leave them up one more day, then cancel them. The ones in Proctor, with no delay mind you, have only been up a few hours, give them a chance to stretch their legs.....so to speak.”

“I’m with my girl Harry, at least one more day. In fact, we should leave one of the Houses up for longer, just to mess with them.” Harry started nodding at the first one, and then stopped.

“All right, but only if the House we leave up is Jefferson. I want to take advantage of this.....what was his name Jonas?”

“Dan Burton.”

“Right, I want to take advantage of his bragging. It would teach him a lesson if he got in trouble for it. But still, I want Cortez’ off right now, or I’m going to puke in the Lounge, and the house elves don’t like cleaning that up. I’m on their good side right now, I don’t want to mess that up.” Indeed, the house elf staff never had to go into Harry’s room because of Winky, and the gang’s table at meals got really good food every time because of it. All the girls started laughing especially.

“Fine, fine, just destroy my fun. Come on Warrick.” Reiko gave Harry a poke with her elbow, and the couple went upstairs and deprogrammed the bathrooms. They did Shawnee later that night, and somehow persuaded a perplexed Ray Elwood to do the same for Proctor. Harry had to make the pitch himself.

“Trust me Ray, we don’t want to go overboard here. There’s a free swamp in it for you either way, don’t worry.” That ended that debate, with a change of fee.

“I live in a muggle neighborhood at home Harry, could I have a couple of talking tattoos instead?” Harry was prepared to offer double that.

“Done. Our next thing will come after Valentine’s Day, if you’re interested.”

“I am, count me in.”

“Terrific. Now, if you don’t mind me asking.....”

“Nothing bad happened between Claudia and me dude. It just didn’t click is all, nothing to write home about.” Harry had a sneaking suspicion that Ray had only asked Claudia out as an entrée to the

gang, but figured that she had had every opportunity to object, but she hadn't as of yet. They needed an in to Proctor, and Harry was mirroring his classmate's thinking about an 'associate' member of the gang.

"I won't ask for details mate, don't worry."

"I'm surprised you waited this long to ask."

"Well it technically is none of my business you know." They parted a few minutes later, and soon Jefferson was the only House. The smell lasted on 48 hours for each person, but inevitably there were people who got nailed more than once. Dan Burton, who was now denying anything to do with the prank, was getting more and more hard questions, by upperclassman, and now by teachers. The faculty had finally gotten tired of it, and after a hasty conference with Riley Poole informing him of this new development, Harry personally did the Jefferson boy's bathroom, while Sophie was fixing the other one.

The lack of questioning of the gang bothered Harry, though he was unaware that Murray and Heyman had their hands full with other, more important matters. This would come into play later on however, and he would understand then.

Sunday, January 26, 1997

Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch

9:00 pm GMT

Two figures met underneath the north stands, both hiding their faces as they exchanged murmured greetings. Two people stood off in the middle of the field, guarding.

"Do you have the stuff I wanted?"

"Of course I do lad, it's all right here." He patted the satchel he carried.

“Here’s the money, and the information.” The younger man handed over a money pouch, and a rolled up piece of parchment. The older one hefted the bag.

“You don’t need to count it, it’s all there, just as we agreed.”

“I know son, your word has never been in doubt. I have a bonus item for you, at no cost. Let me pull it out.” He turned around, as the younger man looked nervously around, especially toward school. The older one had pulled a bottle out, and soaked a handkerchief with it.

“What’s that smell?”

“It’s called chloroform, it’s the latest thing.” He got close to his prey, and jammed the cloth against his face, holding it tightly for a few seconds during the struggle. The two figures out in the stadium couldn’t see what was going on, and did not notice right away that their friend had been taken away, it was only ten minutes later that they decided to investigate, for naught. They spent half an hour looking around, and after not finding any clue of where their friend went, ran back to the castle. They didn’t tell anyone where they had gone though, and did not share anything about where their missing friend might be.

Hogsmeade Village

10:00 pm GMT

Voldemort left the Shrieking Shack, Bella and Lucius at his side and they walked toward the main thoroughfare of the village, with Malfoy levitating a large chest beside him. The Shack had been their Scottish Headquarters for the last two weeks, as Pettigrew had taken Snape there, and Voldemort had been spending more time there than he had anticipated. His project for the time of Snape’s confinement had been a thorough memory search of Snape, taking great care to find out exactly what Snape knew about the Death Eaters, and what Greasy had shared with Dumbledore, and anyone else he might be in contact with. He had found enough inconsistencies to justify the torture he planned to visit upon the younger man, though none of

them involved Dumbledore, Snape did not even have a miniscule amount of affection for the older man. The inconsistencies mostly involved Snape getting out of the war, with as much of the Death Eater money as he could, and there were errant whispers in Snape's mind about Scrimgeour, though they were mostly unformed. Pettigrew and his Master wondered if Snape had gotten the money idea from Fudge, though there was no hint of a connection between the two men.

Michael Parrish had arrived three days after the meeting that agreed to hire him, though it took a few trips to get all of his gear. He had set up shop in Snape's area, and immediately started throwing his weight around by correcting several of Greasy's formulas and current projects. Snape had no idea of this of course, as Pettigrew had simply walked into his room and stunned him, and had transported him to the Shrieking Shack, where he kept the man sedated constantly as planned. A steady diet of the Cruciatus Curse helped keep Snape under control, as Wormtail knew that his life wouldn't be worth a Knut if Greasy even tried to escape. As far as the rat could tell though, Snape was never mentally alert enough to cause trouble.

Snape had never hid his contempt for Pettigrew, both as children and as adults, and the rat spent a very enjoyable two weeks torturing his old nemesis. With Voldemort's acquiescence, Pettigrew told Snape that Potter was responsible for his plight. He explained in great detail that Potter had demanded Snape's torture as a show of good faith before Potter would join the Death Eater ranks. Snape wasn't often lucid enough to understand all this, but the word 'Potter' being spoken over and over certainly got his attention. It was usually followed by Cruciatus though, and Snape's tenuous hold on sanity slipped away more with every session.

Fortunately for this strategy, Parrish was working out very well, he was reasonably friendly to pretty much everyone, as well he should be with the kind of salary he was bringing down. He was subservient enough to Voldemort to get along with him, and otherwise did not get involved in tactical planning, except when they involved his area of expertise. His short-term work was passing muster very easily, and he had no problem with Bella as his escort back to Bodo every morning to check on his long-term potions, which were too fragile, or

unstable, to be moved. Bella always reported back that nothing strange had happened, that Parrish went nowhere but his laboratory, and she had even learned a few things, as the teacher in Parrish had not totally gone away.

Greyback had agreed, via post, to the meeting without changes. Voldemort had deployed his Death Eaters around the village, all with either Invisibility Cloaks on or under Disillusionment Charms in place. Not even close to his full complement was here though, just in case Greyback was setting them up. The bad man still had his contacts within the Ministry though, even with Edgecombe now serving a life sentence in Azkaban.

Flashback to 10 days previous:

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

Wormtail rushed into the study, interrupting Voldemort and Bella, who were going over the tactical plan for the Greyback meeting. Voldemort did not like interruptions per se:

“Wormtail.” Said in a flat, angry voice, but without anything coming from his hands.....his wand being the third drawer of Harry’s desk at the moment.

“Master, Edgecombe was arrested yesterday afternoon.” All right, thought the bad man grudgingly, that constituted a necessary interruption.

“Details.”

“We don’t have many yet, except that most of Malfoy’s network was taken into custody as well this morning. They must have broken the information out of Magdalena, she was the only one not in residence here to know all of those names, since she set up their illicit floo connections.”

“Bella, go retrieve your brother-in-law.” She left without a word.

“Do your sources know how they found out about her activities?”

“No Master, all anyone is saying is that it was an anonymous tip.”

“What is your theory?” He only did this in private, asking for Pettigrew’s input like this, but the rat thought differently enough from him in style that it was often worthwhile. Pettigrew didn’t hesitate:

“I think they found Fudge. Biller, Bones, and Westbrook and company were gone all afternoon, and while we don’t know where they went, or even if they were together.....well my gut tells me that they were Down Under, where we heard Fudge was rumored to be. I have no facts to back that up with, except that Fudge knew about Edgecombe, and Biller would have broken him in seconds, with or without Veritaserum.” Voldemort let this roll around in his mind for a few seconds.

“Interesting, and very plausible. What is our exposure if they did get him? Beyond the ones already arrested.”

“None as far as I know Master, unless Fudge had turned one of our people before his exile.”

“No, that wouldn’t have happened, all that fool cared about was money, and keeping his own position. If he had anything to trade with Scrimgeour he would have done it already, for a guarantee of immunity from his past crimes.”

“I will have our people there keep a closer watch on that sort of thing.”

“Don’t expose them too much Wormtail, with Magdalena gone we must husband our resources there. Let them get comfortable, and we will do another Azkaban raid, now that they have enough of our sympathizers there.” Bella now returned with Malfoy. Voldemort had the rat fill him in, and Malfoy was aghast.

“How much does this harm us Lucius? How easy are those people to replace?”

“It does not cost us any cash my Lord, but as for intelligence purposes.....well no, they're not easy to replace. Our network is hurt, but I can assure you Master, it is not compromised, at least our safety here is not.”

“How much does your wife know?”

“My wife Master?”

“CRUCIO!” He held it for five seconds, and let the gasping man loose, it was an impressive feat considering that it was wandless, though Voldemort did have other wands at his disposal, even if none of them worked as well as the one Harry had captured.

“Your dear wife Narcissa you idiot, or do you have more than one? Does that blonde twit know of the rest of your network!” Malfoy composed his thoughts as quickly as he could, as Bella grinned at the description of her sister.

“No Master, I have always kept that from her, in case she is picked up.” Voldemort rolled his eyes.

“Somehow I don't believe you, tell her to pack what she needs and to move in here with you. I do not want her loose in our society, she's too tempting a target.”

“Yes Master. And my son?”

“Leave him where he is, and tell him to keep up his monitoring of Shepherd and Lupin, as well as Potter's former cohorts.”

“Yes Master, as you wish.”

“I want your woman here by this time tomorrow, Malfoy Manor is to be put in mothballs until our victory is complete, it is just too tempting

a target for our Ministry friends, and for Dumbledore as well. Dismissed.” Malfoy looked as though he wanted to say something more, but the look on his Master’s face did not encourage this. Wormtail, at a nod from Voldemort, departed as well, with the bad man and Bella resuming their plotting.

End Flashback

Greyback was to meet them in the center of the village square, both sides were to just bring three people. No one on the Death Eater side had any illusions about Greyback keeping to that part of the deal, and they assumed he would think likewise about them. They were a few minutes early, and Bella looked around. The buildings were all empty, and the silence was deafening.

“Not the Hogsmeade I remember.” Voldemort allowed a smirk on his face, he had, after all, been the one to order the village’s destruction, twice. The second one didn’t work too well, but the village had still been abandoned, so he still won that part of the exercise.

“ It suits my purposes. We need Diagon Alley, but a Hogsmeade.....well they should have had a better defense plan.” Malfoy was very quiet, and had been ever since his brief Cruciatus ten days earlier. Bella kept her voice low.

“Will he show up?”

“Someone will, this is too tempting to pass up for those animals.” They had wards up all around town, preventing any magical departures by their prey, as they didn’t know how many Wizard/Werewolves there were. A minute later, a hooded figure walked out from behind Honeydukes. The figure stopped approximately five meters from the trio.

“Greyback?”

“Yes, you must be Voldemort.” The man, and it was a man, kept his hood on, and spoke with a deep, raspy voice. The hood didn’t matter either way, because none of the three had a clue of what Greyback

looked like. Only Pettigrew did, and he was back at the Shrieking Shack preparing Snape for his final journey.

“I am, we finally meet.”

“Do you have my money?”

“I do, 100,000 galleons. Half for past services, the other half for a future raid.”

“A raid on where?”

“You will be told when the time comes.”

“I would like to know now, the last raid had a bit of an advance warning after all.”

“You did lose a lot of people, as did we.”

“United in failure we were then. I repeat, where am I raiding?”

“The Isle of Man, where the Auror Academy is located.” This was a lie of course, and was never a reasonable target for the Death Eaters, who wanted no part of the other governments represented at the Academy to become involved. And if they're best and brightest were attacked by werewolves, they would certainly become involved.

“First things first, levitate that money over to me. Don't come any closer.” Voldemort nodded at Malfoy, who used our old friend Wingardium Leviosa to levitate the chest over to the werewolf. He opened it, and poked through it with a finger, never taking his eyes off the three magicals, though it appeared on the surface that he was theirs to kill if they wanted to.

“When am I carrying out this raid?”

“I told you, I would tell you the details at another time.”

“Yes, but you are not my Lord and Master now are you? So I’ll ask the questions that I choose to. Give me an idea, in general.”

“March, sometime in March.”

“A killing raid, or a scaring raid?”

“A carnage raid. Any more questions?” This was said harshly, though Voldemort was never what one could call friendly. The man just chuckled.

“You really know how to romance someone Voldemort. Let’s just stand here for awhile shall we, get to know one another.”

“So we can fall into whatever simple trap you have planned for us? You’ll die long before we will if you betray us.”

“We’re going to stay to make sure this gold isn’t fake. What’s the term you Wizards use for it? Leprechaun gold?” Since that was exactly what it was, Malfoy gave a slight flinch, which the werewolf noticed. Voldemort, on the other hand, did not notice this, and chuckled sarcastically.

“So untrusting Greyback.”

“No I’m not Wizard, and neither are you, so who are you trying to fool.”

“Perhaps I should kill you now, and deal with your replacement.” Greyback started cackling.

“What makes you think I would be so easy to kill? Your overconfidence will be your undoing. Ask the Potter the kid.” The bad man took a few steps forward.

“Be very careful animal, you’re hanging by a thread.” Greyback was still kneeling in front the chest, and the three magicals, and they could not see his hands.

“Yet here you are, begging for my help, because your people aren't up to the job themselves.” Bella could not longer restrain herself.

“CRUCIO!”

Only to hit nothing but air, as Greyback dodged easily. Even though he was not in his ‘changed’ form, Greyback still had a lot of his werewolf reflexes. He stood there with a confident smile, they could see that much on his face.

“Enough Bella. Greyback, how long must we stand here before you are satisfied?” Greyback closed the trunk and stood up, hefting it in one hand.

“Oh I was satisfied from the off. I know the gold isn't real, but I'm not too worried about that. Your man Malfoy here will pay the 100,000 and much more.”

“You must be insane you filthy piece of shite, why would I pay you anything?”

“Gringott's numbered account 4234BD Malfoy. You'll pay if you want your son Draco back, and killing me now will not help that. I know you have men around the perimeter Voldemort, as you know I do as well. All it takes is me not returning tonight, and the best you can hope for is that young Draco becomes one of us. I don't need to tell you the worst, do I?” Bella now put her wand down, and Voldemort walked in front of Lucius, preventing him from doing anything.

“I would need proof that you have him.” Greyback took off his cloak, to reveal another tied around his waist. He undid it, and threw it over to them.

“This still has enough of his stink on it to prove it to you.” It was a Slytherin cloak, and Lucius knew at once that it was his son's.

“How much?” He croaked out.

“Half a million galleons, payable one week from now at the very latest.”

“We could torture his location out of you, very easily you filth.”

“Now now, name calling gets us nowhere. Besides, I don’t know where he is, and I won’t for a little while yet. I didn’t want to tempt you too much, I know how torture happy you arrogant people are. Just remember which of us fears the muggles more, your kind, or ours. Pay up Malfoy, or your clan will have lost its scion.” He started to back up, and slowly walked away.

“Give my regards to Pettigrew.” He suddenly changed form, and within a second, he was away, the Killing Curses hurled by Malfoy and Lestrange crashing into Honeydukes, but not coming close to a hit. Malfoy started to run after him, but Voldemort grabbed his arm.

“Don’t Lucius, you would never catch him, and we can’t risk you being killed.” You’re worth too much money, was the unspoken reason.

“That animal has my son!”

“Yes, thank you Lucius. It’s not like I wasn’t standing right next to you!” He didn’t curse the man though, even Voldemort wasn’t totally unsympathetic here. Bella grabbed her brother-in-law and pulled him away. She talked quietly with him, as Voldemort stood there and contemplated things.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you Master, please forgive me.” Voldemort surprised Lucius and Bella by absently patting the other man on the shoulder.

“I am not totally without compassion Lucius, we will get your son back. Now you can afford this easily, one payment transfer and this will all be over.”

“It will be that easy?”

“We can only hope, and even if it doesn’t, there is a way we can spin this to our advantage.” He saw the curious looks of his two henchpeople.

“We’ll simply blame Dumbledore.”

End Chapter

Sunday, January 26, 1997 Continued.

Hogsmeade Village

“We will simply blame Dumbledore.” Voldemort said it matter-of-factly, and Bella and Lucius were stunned into silence for a few moments, as their Master let out a piercing whistle, the signal for those Death Eaters on the perimeter to fall in. No red sparks that might be picked up by any watchers at the school. There were two dozen of them, and they came on a run. Voldemort pointed at a Lestranger brother.

“Rodolphus, go get Wormtail, and take his place guarding the bungler. Get him over here.” Lestranger didn’t say a word as he nodded his head, and took off toward the Shrieking Shack at a run. Wormtail arrived, panting from the exertion, about two minutes later, he really needed to lose a few pounds. Once there, Voldemort filled them in on the kidnapping. Narcissa was back at Riddle Manor, and everyone, Voldemort included, was rather happy about that. She may have been loyal to the cause, but a mother’s love was a mother’s love.

“How will we blame Dumbledore Master?”

“Lucius, our dear Headmaster has already let one prominent student slip through his fingers in recent months, to have another, his pet Potter’s nemesis to boot, taken out from under his nose. Well let us just say that that would be a little habit forming. Crabbe, go immediately to Diagon Alley and send a message to your son and find out exactly what happened. Instruct him to tell the old man and Shepherd absolutely nothing about what he and Goyle Jr. may or may not have done. Have him respond immediately. Go now.”

“Yes Master.” Crabbe Apparated away immediately.

“Nott, when we get back to Riddle Manor, comb the archives for anything with Dumbledore’s handwriting on it, there must be something in there. A letter would be best, a signature probably good enough. Once that is done, you and Wormtail will go into muggle London and find the best muggle handwriting forger in the underworld

there. Bring him back to me and we will work what the ransom note will say. Promise the forger whatever money you have to, and a retainer if necessary, we might want to do this again in the future.”

“What if Greyback tells Dumbledore the truth?” Voldemort’s sympathy for his minion was rapidly running out with stupid questions like this coming from him.

“What if he does Lucius? That would give the old fool even less credibility in our world, being seen consorting with animals like that. Our public will forgive him Lupin, but not Greyback. Now you and I will deal with your wife. She must go back to Malfoy Manor and ‘receive’, so to speak, the ransom note.”

“The public will believe that Dumbledore would not only kidnap Draco, but try to ransom him as well? His star hasn’t fallen that far has it?” Bella asked that like she wanted to believe this plan was viable.

“It will after we release some more of Potter’s story to them. How he was abused by those muggles all those years, with Dumbledore’s tacit approval. Dolohov, leak some of that to the Daily Prophet tomorrow morning. You know who to deal with, paint Potter in the best possible light, and Dumbledore in the worst. But don’t let the story run for a couple of days, we want the old man and his faculty of fools to sweat a little.”

“Yes Master, first thing.”

“Good, now let us repair to the Shrieking Shack, we have to say our goodbyes to our close friend Severus.” The group walked the short distance to the Shack, to find Rodolphus and a few goons guarding an unconscious Snape.

“He hasn’t moved Master.”

“No matter if he has, he’ll never regain consciousness. Any of you wishing to perform a final Cruciatus, do so now.” The assembled needed no further invitation, as they poured in into their old colleague.

Only Nott really held back, he had directed a calm, but pertinent question to his boss a few days previous.

“Are we really ready to kill Snape over just that one misstep? Potions talents aside, doesn't he still have some Dumbledore/Potter value left in him?” Voldemort, respecting Nott's earnestness in regards to his duties, indulged him with a thoughtful answer, particularly since they were alone at the time.

“Perhaps, but Wormtail and I weakened him too much that night, and tests have shown that he will only decline. At best he would be a slightly improved version of Frank Longbottom, at worst a bowl of jelly that we would have to feed and such, all that probably within a couple of months. Besides, the old man will never believe him totally again. Rufus won't let him for one, I've heard that he keeps our friend on a very tight leash.” That was as close as the bad man would come to admitting that perhaps his overzealous desire for torture had gone a tad bit overboard. Nott accepted the explanation with a slight bow, and said no more, though he dearly wanted to.

The torture, if you want to call it that since Snape didn't technically feel any of it, lasted another 10 minutes. Voldemort then selected a team of Death Eaters to deliver Snape to his final destination. They were about to leave, when Nott, who had left early so that he could quickly complete his Dumbledore mission, returned.

“Master, there are Aurors outside Riddle Manor.” The room stopped dead immediately, and Rastaban Lestrage dropped his share of Snape's body. The boss didn't bat an eye.

“Are they readying for an attack?”

“No Master, they've set up at least one Listening Post. They're set up in the graveyard, and I detected at least three people.” That was all the manpower there was there, but Nott didn't know that.

“So you don't know for sure that they're Aurors.” That was Malfoy, and Nott turned to him with a look of scorn.

“Well I did not stop to introduce myself and check out their uniforms if that’s what you are asking.” Nott’s quiet contempt made Voldemort smile vaguely, as Malfoy, not having the best night anyway, walked away, burning.

“No Master, I do not know for sure, but who else could they be? Dumbledore does not have the manpower to set up that kind of surveillance.” He did, as Harry could attest, but Voldemort ignored that.

“When was the last time we checked the outer perimeter Bella?” She shrugged.

“Two weeks perhaps. None of us venture outside at all at the Manor, so we never really saw the need to do more scanning out there.”

“Well there’s no way they can penetrate our wards without tipping us off, I’m not worried. Bella, detail a couple of people to keep an eye on our watchers, and come up with a plan to strike them if I decide later on it’s necessary.” Inside their minds, every single one of them, Voldemort included, were wondering: How the hell did they get tipped off about Riddle Manor? This was not the time to talk about it though.

“Yes Master.” The group separated now. They delivered Snape to his not-so final resting place, and then departed for ‘home’. Later that night, after some clandestine snooping, they found five more Listening Charms, spread out over the area around the mansion. They were powerful Charms in and of themselves, and could detect anything leaving the house. There were no more Aurors though, and their position in the graveyard was marked, if Voldemort decided to move on them, they would be dead in seconds.

Monday, January 27, 1997

Office of the Headmaster, Hogwarts

4:00 pm GMT

There was a knock on the door, and Dumbledore looked up from the mountain of paperwork on his desk, the cross to bear for any administrator, muggle or magical.

“Enter!” He waited a few ticks, as he heard the footsteps coming up the stairs. It was Cho Chang and Michael Corner, still a couple after all these months.

“Miss Chang, Mr. Corner, to what do I owe the pleasure?” The two, who had been debating for the last five minutes straight on how to approach this, looked at each other. Finally, after a few seconds of silence, Michael took the bull by the horns.

“Sir, I think you should come with us. There’s something you need to see, and we’re not sure how to describe it.” Dumbledore now noted the pale look on Corner’s face, and the fact that Cho’s hands were shaking a little. He delayed a little with a question.

“Shouldn’t you be having Quidditch practice right now? I know Madam Hooch is under the weather, but surely she trusts you to monitor yourselves sufficiently?” Oh he wasn’t even close, they both thought.

“It’s not that sir, and we were about to have practice.....well you really should see this for yourself sir.” Dumbledore wasn’t unduly alarmed, but the looks on their faces made him very curious.

“Very well.” Dumbledore rose, and absentmindedly put a Warming Charm on himself in lieu of a cloak or a coat. They walked outside in silence, toward the Quidditch Pitch. Once they got close enough, they saw the Ravenclaw squad, twelve total with reserves, all gathered near the entrance. A few of the students had become sick, and were being held by the others. Dumbledore was at a loss, until Orla Quirke pointed out what had done this:

Snape was hanging, gallows style, from one of the Quaffle hoops. He was, thankfully, clothed, but there was a red stain all up and down his body.

Dumbledore had rarely been so shocked in his life, and that was saying something. He just stared at his old friend/student/protégé/enemy for a couple of minutes, as the students behind him started fidgeting. Cho, for lack of anything better to do, walked up to him and tapped him on the shoulder, bringing him back.

“Headmaster, what do you want to do? I mean.....we should get him down or something shouldn't we?”

“Yes Miss Chang, you are correct of course. Will you and Mr. Corner help me please. Miss Quirke, I will need to use your broom for a few minutes.”

“Of course sir.” Cho and Michael wanted nothing more than to say ‘hell no, we're not touching him’, but they had no choice here really. With the other students distracted by the specter of seeing Dumbledore flying, the three of them flew up to the hoop, and Dumbledore cut him down, with Cho and Michael carrying him to the ground. Before he left the hoop, the old man did a thorough Scourgify, no need for any forensic evidence to be collected. Once on the ground, Cho tried to get his attention, as his gaze seemed to be a little fogged over.

“Shall I go get Professor McGonagall sir? Or Professor Flitwick?” The Headmaster had no wish for Minerva's various facial tics, which would communicate quite clearly ‘I told you so.’ In spite of her reaction to Harry's Howlers, she had always loathed Snape, and made sure that Dumbledore was reminded of that fact periodically. Likewise Remus would most certainly dance a private jig, and his old enemy was now gone.....if in fact this was Snape, Dumbledore suddenly thought. He wouldn't put it past Voldemort to try a Polyjuice trick like this just to give him a heart attack.

“No Miss Chang, that won't be necessary. Instead, Miss Quirke, will you please go to Madam Pomfrey and inform her of what has happened. Tell her not to share this with anyone at all, and to have a section of the Infirmary cordoned off for when we get there. And don't tell anyone else about this either on your way Miss Quirke.”

“Yes sir.” She hopped on her broom and rocketed off toward the front doors.

“Kids, I also have to ask you not to tell anyone about this, not until I have had time to notify The Ministry and tell the rest of the faculty. I’m not going to threaten you with any punishment or anything like that, but if you would please do as I ask, I would very much appreciate it.” Cho gave everyone present a look, and they all nodded their heads.

“Of course sir.” He spoke only so Cho could hear him now.

“Thank you Miss Chang, and I compliment you on the way you did this, a very worthy choice for Head Girl you were.” He addressed the team.

“Kids, I’m afraid your practice is cancelled for the day. I will find a way for you to make it up before your game against Slytherin. Please come with me.” He levitated Snape’s body and started the slow walk back to the castle. Cho and Michael flanked him, with the others trailing along behind. Dumbledore’s thoughts were a jumble as he walked, as his mind raced alternately with memories of Snape, and thoughts of what to do now. He had given up on Snape’s spying services, believing him to be compromised, but still had hopes that the younger man had not been playing him along, or even just recently.

They got to the doors and the old man sent Michael ahead to clear the way to the Infirmary. Somehow they attracted no attention, and Dumbledore asked the team to stick around, not really trusting that they wouldn’t spill the beans before he was ready to do it himself. A few floo calls later, and most of the faculty had gathered, save the Divination teachers and Shepherd. Madam Pomfrey had been examining Snape for the last five minutes, and turned to Dumbledore and McGonagall, who had been watching her in mute fascination.

“How did he die Poppy?”

“From Cruciatus, a lot of it from what I can tell. The physical wounds were done post-mortem, and seemed to be done in muggle fashion.”

“Can you tell how long he has been dead?”

“Less than 24 hours, probably around 15 or so. They would have done the hanging like that at night.” No kidding, thought all of the assembled students. That wasn’t really the case though, 10:00 am would have been just as good, since only the Quidditch teams used the Pitch, and no practices were held during class times obviously. Dumbledore walked over to the floo, he had no choice with his next move.

“Minister Scrimgeour!”

Rufus happened to be in his office, to Dumbledore’s relief.

“Yes Albus?”

“Severus is dead, his body was found on our Quidditch Pitch.” So much for the polite niceties, and Rufus was left speechless for a few seconds.

“You have him with you?”

“I do Minister, what’s left of him.” It gave Dumbledore a small amount of pleasure to see him flinch, and the old man needed all the pleasure he could get right about now.

“All right, I’ll grab Amelia and we’ll be over in a couple of minutes.”

“Thank you Minister.” Rufus and Bones arrived five minutes later to a silent room, though most of the students looked curiously at The Minister, this being his first trip to Hogwarts since his ascension, at least that they knew about. Dumbledore and Cho filled him in on the events, and he gave Snape the once-over.

“So it hasn’t been the hour yet?” For Polyjuice, which was now on everyone’s mind.

“No Minister, there’s still about 25 minutes left according to my calculations.”

“No note left on the body or anything like that?”

“Nothing, it was the second thing I checked, after looking for a pulse.” Rufus grimaced at seeing the knife work done to Snape. He had barely known the man, and like most had a negative opinion of him, but this was still pretty gruesome. He decided on an easy move first.

“Amelia, send a team to Snape Manor and see if there’s a Dark Mark or anything like that over it.”

“Yes Minister.” She went over to the floo and gave out instructions. The Minister motioned Dumbledore over to him so they could have a private word.

“Is there anything you would like to tell me Albus?” Dumbledore had put up with a lot from this man over the last four months, but this was a little to much for his taste, and he let his anger show a little bit.

“What are you accusing me of Rufus?”

“I’m not accusing anyone of anything Albus, I just want to make sure it wasn’t your people who did this.” He didn’t really think so, but this was another step in his program of keeping Dumbledore in his place.

“Miss Chang will verify my stunned reaction when I came upon Severus. And I refuse to believe that anyone at Hogwarts or in The Order had anything to do with this.” That The Minister took this with a grain of salt was evident in the brief twist of his smile

“And Potter?”

“Harry is thousands of kilometers away.” That Harry might have done this had certainly occurred to Dumbledore, but the distance factor had rendered it unlikely.

“That doesn’t answer my question, but I too find it unlikely, though not impossible, that he snuck over here and killed Snape.” The floor fired, and Bones spoke to someone for a moment. She walked over to the two men.

“There is nothing strange at Snape Manor. We have some Listening Charms up, and they have not been disturbed by any human activity since he escaped his house arrest.”

“Thank you Amelia.” She stuck around, having taken in the looks Dumbledore and Rufus were giving each other.

“What do we do with him?” Dumbledore sighed.

“There are family members abroad that we can contact.”

“Contact them only Albus, The Ministry will take custody of the body and bury it. He was a fugitive after all, and does not in any way deserve the honor of a funeral.” Rufus, McGonagall, and Bones all looked in total agreement on that, and the odds of those three agreeing on a whole lot are pretty slim.

“I doubt they will object. Will you seize his property?” That was an option for something like this, one not always taken.

“No, but his heirs, whomever they may be, will have some taxes to pay. Or are you his heir Albus?”

“I have no idea Minister, I have a copy of his will on file, but it is sealed and I have never looked at it.” Sure you haven’t, Rufus’ facial expression communicated quite clearly, but he let it go.

“Well there’s no hurry, and there’s no need to keep this quiet really. We’ll send out a press release to The Daily Prophet, we’ll just say that unnamed students found him, though I’m sure some of them will talk about it, no matter what threats you made to them.” Dumbledore

bristled at the idea that his students would so blithely disobey him, but re-focused himself for another question.

“What will be The Ministry’s official reaction?” More teachers had come up to them, and they were all quite curious as to what Rufus would say.

“We’ll butcher him like a prize hog of course. He was a Death Eater after all, and the most unpopular teacher Hogwarts has ever had.” He said it so blandly that Dumbledore was a little taken aback. The others were nodding though, and quite agreed with the strategy. McGonagall had been bothered about something for quite awhile, and finally used the silence to address it.

“Where is Professor Shepherd? He should have been here by now.” Indeed Shepherd wasn’t there, which was noteworthy in that he was Snape’s replacement in both his jobs, and along with McDowell, was the only teacher to have been a schoolmate of the man. Rufus looked like he could care less, but Dumbledore went to the floo and called for him.

“Professor Shepherd!” There was no answer, and Dumbledore was half tempted to send someone to look for him. All teachers were supposed to let him know if they left the castle, and he wondered what could have stopped him from responding to an all faculty summons. That thought process was stopped when Shepherd himself appeared in the Infirmary doorway, looking much as he always did, which is to say calm and detached. Shepherd was just under six feet tall and a little overweight, with none of Snape’s greasiness and little of his pale features. He approached them, and McGonagall rounded on him.

“You were expected 10 minutes ago Charles, the summons was not voluntary.” Shepherd was either not listening to her, or pretending not to.

“I’m sorry, did you say something Minerva?” She turned pink at that, and got even more angry as Shepherd turned his back on her and

addressed Dumbledore, speaking so that the Ravenclaw students, still under velvet detention, could not hear him.

“Headmaster, one of my Slytherins has gone missing.”

“Who?”

“Draco Malfoy.” McGonagall, who didn’t have the sixth year NEWT class that day, was unclear about how he knew this.

“What makes you think he’s gone missing?” Shepherd answered her indirectly.

“Remus, was he in your class today?”

“Nope, Theo Nott told me that he was sick. I didn’t think anything of it really.” Shepherd looked back at Dumbledore, who was not liking the coincidence of Snape turning up dead and his protégé not turning up at all.

“Nor was he in my class, and Nott told me the same thing. I went to check on him, and he is nowhere to be found.”

“What did Messrs. Crabbe and Goyle say? They’re usually attached at the hip to him.”

“They had no idea Headmaster, other than that he was sick. Either Draco has left the castle, or he has a private bolt-hole somewhere that we don’t know about.” Remus had a thought about that, but kept it to himself for the time being. Nearly Headless Nick had floated through and was about two seconds from spotting Snape, when Dumbledore distracted him, for that and another reason.

“Sir Nicholas, if you would do me a favor?”

“Of course Headmaster, you must but name it.”

“Take as many of your fellow ghosts as you can and do a search for Draco Malfoy for me please. If you find him, tell him to see me in my office.”

“We shall find him straightaway Headmaster.” He floated through the west wall, not having seen the dead body. Remus decided to do likewise.

“Headmaster, I have an idea I would like to pursue, I’ll be back in 10 minutes.” He got a nod from Dumbledore, and a perplexed look from McGonagall. He left and walked quickly up to the Gryffindor Common Room, where thankfully his target was sitting by the fire with his girlfriend. He walked up to them, earning stares from everyone else in the room.

“Neville, I have a small favor to ask of you.”

“Sure Professor Lupin, what is it?” Remus lowered his voice to just above a whisper.

“I need a quick look at a certain Map you have.” Neville didn’t hesitate.

“Sure, if you don’t mind looking at it in some privacy.” Remus took that to mean Neville’s room, and answered by starting toward the stairs. Neville and Luna followed him, and they were soon in the sixth year boys’ room. Neville looked at Remus.

“If you wouldn’t mind stepping outside for a second sir, I would just as soon keep my hiding place secret.” Only he and Luna were inoculated against the Pink, though Ron and the others were aware of it, having been given fair warning.

“A Harry convert I see.”

“No sir, I just don’t want you to get tempted, and become pink.” He gave a quick explanation of the Pink defense, and Remus started chuckling.

“Lead me not into temptation eh? I’m now quite glad that I didn’t just pull a Ron and ransack your things.” He left the room, and 10 seconds later was back in. He opened up the Map and pored over it.

“Who are you looking for sir?”

“A missing student, I’m sorry I cannot say who right now. You’ll understand later I promise.” He went over all the likely and unlikely spots and there was no sign of Draco in Hogwarts Castle. After five minutes, he handed the Map back.

“Thank you Neville, I’ll see you two later.” He hurried back to the Infirmary, having taken nine minutes on this errand. Dumbledore and the others were still waiting for Nick to come back with a report, and McGonagall was trying to hector a thoroughly disinterested Shepherd. He didn’t sneer at her, he just ignored pretty much everything she said. Remus pulled Dumbledore aside.

“He’s not here Albus, I checked the Map.” Dumbledore knew all about the Map, but Remus had refused to divulge to him where it was, only that he could get to it on a few minutes’ notice.

“Are you sure Remus?”

“He’s not on the Map, and the Map is never wrong. We need to bring his bodyguards in and Veritaserum the information out of them.” Dumbledore usually resisted these types of things, but this was different.

“Very well. Charles?” Shepherd had been quietly talking with Hill.

“Yes?”

“Please go retrieve Crabbe and Goyle and put them in your office, and have some Veritaserum ready. Remus and I will need to talk with them.”

“Yes sir.” He ambled off, in no great hurry, as was his habit. All the students liked Shepherd, who played no favorites, but the contrast to Snape was often very jarring for them, particularly the older ones. He and Draco had gotten along fine, even if the Potions Master was no Dark ideologue, as Shepherd pretty much left Draco to do as he wanted. Dumbledore addressed the Ravenclaws.

“Kids, you may leave now. Again, please don’t mention this to anyone quite yet. Miss Chang, please ensure that this happens.” Cho left with them, and could be heard making some threats.

Rufus had been listening to all of this Draco talk without interjecting, but now he did.

“Draco is Lucius’ son I take it?”

“Yes, his only child.”

“I remember him from the trial, small and white haired. Keep me apprised of what’s happening with that. Amelia and I will off now, we’ll send some people to take custody of Snape, and we’ll have a press release ready. You can expect a Daily Prophet reporter on your floor in about an hour or so.”

“That will be more than enough time Minister. I have your leave to tell them the truth, or at least most of it?”

“You may tell them anything you wish, as long as it’s true, the amount is up to you. Anything else, check with me first.” Dumbledore took his instructions with more of a docile attitude than the rest of the teachers had ever seen before. Rufus gave some instructions to Madam Pomfrey, and he and Bones flooed back to The Ministry. Dumbledore dismissed the rest of the teachers aside from McGonagall and Remus. They walked quickly up to Shepherd’s office, where Crabbe and Goyle were sitting in chairs, talking nervously about their studies with their Head of House. Remus didn’t trust these two for a second, and quickly used Petrificus Totalus on both of them.

“Charles, please give them the Veritaserum.” Shepherd did, and Remus took the spells off them after about two minutes. Dumbledore handled the questioning.

“Where is Draco Malfoy?” He addressed Goyle with this question and all the others, which turned out to be a rather large mistake. Crabbe Jr., in his note from his father, had been expressly forbidden to share details of the note with Goyle, on the off chance that Dumbledore would assume that questioning one was questioning them both, and pick the wrong boy.....which is what happened, even Crabbe Sr. had his moments of inspiration.

“I don’t know.”

“When did you last see him?”

“Last night.”

“What time?”

“About 9:00 pm or so, I’m not sure when exactly.”

“Where did you last see him?”

“In the Quidditch Pitch, under the stands.” McGonagall went pale at hearing that, and Remus and Dumbledore looked at each other significantly.

“Why were you three under the stands?”

“Crabbe and I weren’t under them, Draco was.”

“Why was he under the stands?”

“He was buying something.”

“What was he buying?”

“Something called heroin, I don’t know what it does.” The teachers did though, and if Shepherd was to be candid, he could tell them that he had tried it once.

“How long has he been buying this heroin?”

“I don’t know, since summer at least. He didn’t buy it last year.”

“Who was he buying from?”

“I don’t know, he wouldn’t tell me.”

“How often does he purchase this heroin?”

“Once a month or so mostly, it was twice in November.”

“Have you ever seen him use it?”

“No, he won’t let us see.”

“So you two were keeping watch for him while he was making the purchase?”

“Yes, that’s what we always do.”

“When did you notice he was gone?”

“After about 15 minutes, it usually takes him a lot less time to do his business.”

“Did you search for him?”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t there.”

“What did you do then?”

“We came back here and went to bed.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone that Draco had disappeared?”

“We didn’t want to get in trouble for leaving the castle.”

“Did he leave on his own, or was he taken?” That was first mention of kidnapping.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you think is more likely?”

“That he left on his own, Draco can take out anybody wanting to harm him.” Loyal to the last, that was Goyle. The adults didn’t disagree with him though, as Malfoy was the top Slytherin of any year in Defense, and undoubtedly had been well trained in Dark fighting by his father and associates. The adults walked into the hallway for a moment, though Remus conjured up some ropes and secured the two boys to their chairs. Shepherd leaned against the wall while eyeing his colleagues, he had his own ideas on how to handle this, but knew he would have to argue his way past the two old people.

“I think that all we can do is wait until morning, and see if he’s back by then.” McGonagall stared incredulously at him.

“One of our students.....one of your Slytherins has been taken!” There were no paintings nearby thankfully. Dumbledore, sensing a blasé insult coming from Charles, intervened.

“We don’t know that Minerva, young Draco could be anywhere. He could be on an errand for Voldemort, or wandering the Forbidden Forest in a drug induced haze. Charles, after we are done here, go search his belongings and see if there’s any trace of the drugs, or the implements to use them.”

“I know what to look for, don’t worry. And Crabbe and Goyle? What should we do with them?”

“Give them a couple of detentions for leaving the castle, but otherwise don't attract any attention to the situation. Remus, I want you and Hagrid to start combing the forest near the Quidditch Pitch. Give Fang something of Draco's and see if he can't pick up a scent.”

“Good idea, if he's in there, he can't have gone far if he's under the influence. How would he have gotten hold of muggle drugs like that? It must be a Wizard supplying him, but why?” Shepherd felt like he should say something here.

“I don't know if any of you have tried heroin before, but do it a couple of times, and you're almost sure to become addicted to it, it's probably the most powerful muggle narcotic there is.”

“I'm sure you would know all about that Charles.” Shepherd simply looked at McGonagall and winked salaciously at her.

“I'd be happy to tell you all about it over a nice glass of wine Minerva.” McGonagall, more than twice the age of her colleague, nearly had a heart attack, as Remus and Dumbledore were both fighting their own smiles. It was definitely something that Snape never would have tried, and it had the desired effect of shutting her up. Mission accomplished, Charles returned to business.

“Are we done with those two idiots in there?”

“Yes Charles, go back with them and make sure they understand to keep this to themselves. They have done a fine job of it so far, so it appears to be within their capabilities.” Crabbe and Goyle, astonishingly, were not among the smartest students of their year, but it took a lot to flunk out of Hogwarts, and they had done the bare minimum required to stay afloat in school.

Shepherd went back into his office, and soon returned with the two goons, giving them a quiet lecture as the three of them passed by on the way back down to the dungeons. Once they were out of earshot:

“Minerva, go and close the Owlery for the remainder of the day.”

“What will we do with young Malfoy once he returns?”

“We will put a Signature Tracking Charm on him the moment we locate him, in fact a series of them, done by all his teachers. You all will test him periodically to see if your markers are still there.” A Signature Tracking Charm was a normal tracker that gave off the magical signature of the one who cast it. Its advantage is that it cannot be taken off and put back on again by the one trying evade. Its disadvantage is that it let's the victim know who is tracking him or her. Aurors rarely used them, though Dumbledore had used them on Ron, Hermione, and Ginny when he was attempting to reel in Harry before he left for America, though they were off now.

“Should we place the castle in lockdown at night? It is all too easy for the students to sneak out.”

“No, the best thing to do now is find Draco before word gets out. We will worry about repercussion for him when the time comes.” The tone had a note of finality to it, and McGonagall and Remus split off to do their assigned tasks. Remus, Hagrid, and Fang spent three hours searching the area around the Quidditch Pitch, and found no evidence of much of anything. Shepherd found trace elements of heroin on the floor around Draco's bed, but did not find the lad's hiding place for his works or any leftover drugs he might have had in his room. Draco did not come back to the castle that night, and Dumbledore informed The Minister as such when the Aurors came to take Snape's body.

The Headmaster answered ten minutes of probing questions from a pair of Daily Prophet reporters, and neither praised Snape nor condemned him, ending the interview as quickly as he could get away with it. He pondered on what the public might think, how certain people might react. So far Remus had kept his emotions to himself, the search for Draco perhaps giving him an outlet. The old man wondered about Harry, and how he might take the news. Would he be happy, perhaps a celebration with his American friends at the death of his tormentor? Would he be reflective, perhaps now might be another avenue of rapprochement for the two of them, with the specter of Snape out of their way. He spent a fitful night, trying to

sleep but not finding much luck with it. It turned out that he tossed and turned almost for nothing, as the shit would not truly hit the fan until Wednesday morning.

Tuesday, January 24, 1997

Great Lakes Dining Hall

8:40 am EDT

Mail Call

The story of Snape's murder was a front page story in The Chronicle, using an article reprinted from The Daily Prophet. Harry read his own name more than once, as many Snape incidents and anecdotes were written about, though only Dumbledore was quoted from the Hogwarts staff. The standard 'Potter was unavailable for comment' tagline was used for him, as if they had tried and failed to contact him. He sighed and passed the paper over to Claudia, he shared his Chronicle subscription with her.

"Dobby!" The small fellow popped in.

"Yes Harry." Harry pointed at the picture of Snape on the front page of the paper, and Dobby gulped twice, but otherwise did not look especially sad about the new situation. He anticipated what Harry wanted from him.

"You want the copy of The Daily Prophet?"

"A mind reader you certainly are Dobby. Please go get the twins' copy, and find out what they think."

"Right away." He popped off, and Harry closed his eyes for a moment.

"Winky!" She now popped in.

“Yes Harry?” He showed her the article as well, her eyes went very wide, but she did not comment.

“Please go to Gringotts and find Bill, ask him if there’s anything he can tell me that’s not in the Prophet.”

“Yes Harry.”

The other six members of the gang were staring intently at Harry as he gave his staff their instructions, but by no means were they the only ones. Students at other tables were looking his way as well, and Murray had made a point not to lose eye contact with him since she had seen the article. She did not immediately approach him however, though she badly wanted to. Sophie finally had to ask.

“What are you thinking Harry?” He turned to her, with a very opaque look to his face.

“I honestly could not begin to know how to answer that Sophie.” Dobby saved her from having to respond to that, he popped back in with a copy of The Daily Prophet. The paper did not have news of the Draco kidnapping yet, and surprisingly had more than just Snape being covered, though he dominated the front page. He quickly read through the articles and was amazed to find that he was not a suspect in the murder. That was why he had wanted the paper, he had just assumed that since he was Snape’s number one enemy.....

“So what did they have to say Dobby?”

“Twin George said that there were out of town all day yesterday and evening, so they found out this morning like the rest of the reading public. They were at a sunny place, if you get my meaning.” A ghost of a smile hit Harry’s face, as he thought of how happy Snape’s death would have made Sirius.

“I do indeed.”

“Twin Fred said that they contemplated waking you up to tell you, but decided that you are a growing boy and you need your sleep, or words to that effect. He said that there was nothing you could have done anyway, even if you had wanted to.”

“Gotcha.” Winky came back right then.

“Bill said that he did not know of this until he read it in the paper Harry. Dumbledore did not inform him or his parents of what happened.”

“So either they’re cut out of the Order decision making, or he just kept it very close to the vest on this one.”

“Bill thought that you would see it that way Harry, and his vote, as he put it, is with the second choice.”

“Thank you both.” They nodded and went back to doing what they had been doing.....Dobby had a sewing project going for Harry that was almost done, and Winky had been straightening up the dorm room. Harry didn’t say anything for a few moments, he just stared at Snape’s face on the newspaper.

“Harry?” A waterfall of emotions splayed out over Harry’s face for a few seconds, and the six could tell that he was doing battle with himself over what to say next.

“We’ll never know whose side he was really on. Who was he a spy for, and why. This must be driving Dumbledore crazy right now, which was the whole point I’m guessing.” He said it calmly, almost wistfully, as his eyes never left the picture of his former tormentor. While the idea of anyone driving Dumbledore crazy was certainly a pleasant one, Harry on the whole preferred that Voldemort not be the one doing it.

“I’m sure that that Voldemort guy wasn’t too happy over the battle they lost.”

“Yeah, Travis told me that they were being a little too careless, thinking that Dumbledore would buy anything they sold him. It probably got Tom thinking that he could do without Snape, or maybe Greasy just pissed him off, you never know with those people. Human life is pretty cheap when you’re in Death Eater camp I’m betting.” The meal was breaking up, as students began heading to their first classes. Harry and Jonas had Muggle Studies, and Professor Ziegler was walking toward them now.

“Harry, Professor Murray would like to see you in her office when you’re done eating. Don’t worry about class, it’s lecture day anyway. Take all the time you need.” Warrick, who barely knew Ziegler, just could not help himself any longer.

“All the time he needs? It’s not like a family member died or anything.” Ziegler, who did have a temper, just smiled.

“No, just a man who’s been very involved in his life for the last six years, and his father’s life before that. Don’t underestimate that Warrick, even someone you hate can become as close as family in their own way. Harry, I’ll see you next Tuesday in class.” He walked off, and Murray was soon out the door herself, with a nod toward Harry. Harry scooped up the last bite of his omelet and gulped it down. He kissed Sophie goodbye and left without a word. Murray was waiting for him and they walked to her office without saying anything. They go there and Murray made sure that the door was secure before turning to Harry, who had an enigmatic look on his face.

“Harry, what’s said in this office, stays in this office. Say it.” He felt the rage building in him quickly, and had no desire to hold it back any longer.

Harry then spoke the words that he didn’t dare share with his friends.....well his American friends anyway.

“It should have been me damn it! I should have been the one to kill him! I feel so cheated, like a little kid who drops his ice cream cone after only one lick.” Murray would have burst out laughing at that last line, but for the look on Harry’s face.

“I figured as much.” Harry started pacing around the office, vaguely noticing a new Dark Detector sitting on the desk that he hadn’t seen when he was there with Fred and George.

“I should have killed him back in July, but nooooooooo, I was too bent on humiliating him and Dumbledore. I should have killed him then Professor Murray and ended that business with one spell, no drama, no betrayals.....just what he deserved. I wouldn’t have had to use an Unforgivable, I had him tied up and everything, right where I wanted him.” Murray gave herself a mental pat on the back for having him say these things in front of her, a professional, rather than his friends. She could only imagine Sophie’s potential reaction to what he had just said.

“What if you had Harry? Where would you be now? Living as a muggle, with a reward bounty on your head? A 16 year old version of that fool Fudge.”

“I would have thought of something, he could have disappeared.” She had never heard Harry sounding so bitter.

“And how would you have felt afterwards?” Harry didn’t break stride and wasn’t facing her as he spoke.

“Totally and completely righteous, I hated that man, I hated him more than I could ever tell you. I would still be at Hogwarts right now if not for him and his desire to pay back my father for shit that happened 20 years ago! Five years he had at me every week in class, every day in the corridors and at meals. I couldn’t take any more of it! Every person has their limit Professor Murray, and I had reached mine. I’ll say this for Dumbledore, at least he pretended to have my best interests at heart most of the time, but that bastard Snape.....” He trailed off and was now looking at the pictures on the wall.

“He was not a good man, I agree with you.” Harry snorted at her understatement, and turned to face her.

“Oh come off it Professor Murray, I’ll give you a \$20 bill right now if you can look me in the eye and tell me that you didn’t at least twice want to kill him yourself, and you only knew him for less than a year.” She smiled, it was a lot more than twice if she was to tell him the truth, but she understood that saying that probably wouldn’t help things here.

“You wouldn’t be paying me any money if I took you up on it Harry, no.”

“I’m only surprised that one of the Daily Prophet hacks didn’t accuse me of the murder.”

“Why would that be so bad? If you really hated him that much?” Harry started laughing, and seemed to have been brought out of his rage.

“Because if I’m getting the blame for something Professor Murray, then I want the pleasure or satisfaction of committing the offense.”

“Good point. Harry, you had your chance to kill Snape back in July, and you passed on it. You know why? Because you are not a murderer.”

“I’ve killed people since then.”

“In a battle Harry, one where your life hung in the balance.”

“It’s a fine line Professor.” Murray, who in younger years had taken the lives of more than one Lycan soldier, could easily relate.

“Yes it is Harry, but you knew where it was then, and you know where it is now.”

“In theory.”

“You had a chance to go after Dumbledore earlier this month.” Harry’s jaw hung open a little bit.

“How did you know about that?”

“He wrote me and told me about it, said that you had expressed feelings about suicide.” Harry’s temper shot through the roof.

“HE WHAT!” She held up both her hands as it looked like he was going to spontaneously combust any second now.

“Calm down Harry, if this was a big deal would I have waited this long to mention something about it?” Harry’s face still had more red than she had ever seen, but he seemed to be calming down a little.

“I then talked to Craig Parker at the Auror Academy, and he put me in touch with Travis Biller, who wrote me with what you really said. Our friend conveniently left out a couple of things that you said.”

“Yet another reason to show you why I left there.” She nodded her head.

“Yes.” Harry had actually been softening toward the old man in recent weeks, sensing that he had perhaps overreacted that day at the Academy. Not any longer though, and his voice took a decidedly cold tinge to it.

“One day I’m going to settle with Albus Dumbledore, one day not too far from now.” Murray never wanted that look directed at her, with or without her wand handy.

“Do you think you could take him?” Expecting Harry to self deprecate a little, she was surprised at his response.

“Right now? I don’t know. In a real duel.....yes, I believe I could, if I used some Dark Magic.”

“You would do that?” She had thought not, but didn’t know the extent of Harry’s private library, from which he sampled something most every afternoon or night.

“I would do whatever it took to kill my enemy, and Albus Dumbledore is my enemy.” There it was, the first time he had ever flat out stated it in front of anyone but Sophie or the twins. It gave him a small sense of relief to get that off his chest.

“It’s a good thing I said no to his proposed visit then. I then reported him to the International Confederation of Wizards for falsely accusing you like that, and trying to undermine your education here. He should be getting their censure in the mail post any day now.” That popped the balloon, and Harry started smiling now.

“Really? Or did you just say that so I wouldn’t destroy your office?”

“Both, as it happens.”

“I wouldn’t have destroyed your office ma’am, I have a little more self control than I did last year.”

“A ‘little’?”

“Okay, a lot. These are some nice things, I wouldn’t want to have to pay to replace them.”

“Funny Harry, very funny.” She was smiling though. Harry’s look was sheepish, but his tone was matter of fact and direct.

“I knew that with Dumbledore I could get away with it, since he needed me. You don’t need me at all, and could probably do without the hassle and drama that life with me brings.”

“On the contrary Harry, the school has benefited from having you around, trust me. And I’m not just talking the pranking either. No more feet though, or any smell for that matter, pranks should be funny, not unpleasant to be around.”

“I admit to nothing.”

“But you deny nothing as well.” Good point.

“That too.” He was trying to keep to just the one lie to her, the one about leaving school.

“Fair enough.”

“What did young Burton say?”

“He cracked under about two seconds of Professor Heyman staring at him.” Harry had still not figured out who Burton was exactly, and was still self-pledged not to go anywhere near the kid, for fear of starting collusion rumors.

“Young people have no fortitude do they?”

“Well young people are prone to bragging, except for you.” Which had not gone unnoticed by the faculty, as Harry only really made a point when he screwed something up in class, which wasn’t that often anyway. A few of the faculty had echoed Heyman in being a little dubious about having Harry come to school here, but they had all been turned around by his lack of braggadocio.

“I have no need for it ma’am, my ego is well fed enough without walking around trying to show off my muscles.” And he didn’t. The thing Harry liked best about the school was that he didn’t have to walk around trying to prove himself to anyone, he could concentrate on being likeable. WWW helped greatly of course, but it was fair to say that Harry was one of the more popular students in his class.

“You have to be wondering why I’m so easy on these pranks.” Harry finally sat down in front of her desk.

“The thought had crossed my mind, yes.”

“There are a lot of pressures on our students, both in the classroom and out. It’s like that with any boarding school, not just the magical ones, since the students are around each other 24 hours a day

instead of seven or so hours. Sometimes you kids, and we teachers, need to let off some steam, have something to concentrate on besides our studies, and what to do with life.” Harry hadn’t expected this line of discussion to come up, but he figured he might as well get something out of it.

“So as long as they stay cute and funny, I can expect a hands-off approach?”

“Right in one, as you Brits like to say.” Oh the twins would love hearing this, suddenly Harry couldn’t wait for mid-April to come.

“We decided to leave Clancy alone anyway.” She smirked at him.

“David thought he got the message across.”

“It was as subtle as a chainsaw, we couldn’t really miss it.” Warrick had, but Harry didn’t want to give Heyman any more ammunition.

“That was the point. Sometimes all subtlety does is cloud the issue.” Harry was quick to throw a disclaimer in there.

“Our no Clancy policy is contingent on him doing the same of course, and leaving the younger kids alone.”

“I have no problem with that, I don’t approve of bullies.” The Cortez Seniors, the ones who should have been handling Clancy, had always been a little intimidated by Heyman’s support of him, and had pretty much left him alone. This didn’t go unnoticed by Clancy himself, and until Harry’s threats, had pretty much run amok.

Now that Harry had unofficial permission to prank to his heart’s content, within the rules, he wanted to get back to something Murray had mentioned earlier.

“Let’s backtrack a little here, now that I’ve calmed down, and talk about Dumbledore coming here.” She had been wondering when he would get back to that.

“He wanted to talk with me about you, and how to plan the rest of your time here.” Harry looked incredulous at the idea.

“And what on earth made him think that you would be receptive to something like that?”

“Beats me, I haven’t spoken or written to him since I left Hogwarts years ago, it’s not like I need him as a job reference. I guess he thought that the suicide accusation would sway me.”

“Does it go without saying that colluding with Dumbledore would be the best and fastest way to remove me from your school?” For the first time Murray showed a little exasperation with Harry.

“It does Harry. Remember, I don’t like him either, for reasons that have nothing to do with you.” He did remember, and that always gave him comfort whenever he thought of the old man.

“Yes ma’am, and I’m very grateful for that. And thanks for doing this, I’m sure you have loads of other things you’d rather be doing right now than counseling a homicidal student.”

“Yet we just established that you are not homicidal, Voldemort and his people excepted.”

“I think I might have to restart the Howler campaign though.”

“Not a bad idea, but perhaps it would be better just to send him a short note, telling him what I told you. It would let him know that you’re on to him, but not so much that it got under your skin.”

“But it did.”

“For a moment, sure. In a lot of ways Dumbledore is like a small child, he wants attention from those who would ignore him.” Harry liked that analogy.

“Good point ma’am. May I borrow a pen and a small piece of paper? Preferably one with Great Lakes letterhead on it.” She slid over a pad of scratch paper that had ‘From the desk of Joanne K. Murray’ on it.

“Of course.” She was very interested to have a first-hand look.

Harry quickly scrawled out a note and slid it over.

Dear Albus,

So I’m suicidal eh? You really are reaching.

H.J. Potter

Murray started chuckling, and handed it back.

“Nice, short and to the point.”

“Dobby!” He popped in.

“Yes Harry?”

“Please take this note to the Post Office in Diagon Alley and mail it to Dumbledore. Don’t bother waiting for a reply.” Dobby nodded, and was away.

“No Howlers to him then? I’m not trying to forbid you or anything, but I just think it’s a bad idea.”

“No Howlers ma’am, as of right now. If he tries any foolishness again though, I might revisit it.”

“He could make things hard on Fred and George though couldn’t he?”

“Perhaps, but Arthur seems to be moving into The Minister’s inner circle, and he’ll make sure Dumbledore doesn’t come down on them.

He just got appointed to The Wizengamot not long ago.” Harry had burst with pride at hearing the news.

“He sounds like a fine man from the way you’ve described him.”

“He is, the twins are more like him than you might think, you’ll find that out when they’re here.” Dobby now popped back in.

“All done Harry, the note is on it’s way. It was two sickles and four knuts, the Post Office in Diagon Alley had a price increase recently.” Harry wondered why Dobby would tell that to him now of all times.

“Well I can afford it. What’s on your mind Dobby?” Dobby looked between the two of them, and answered nervously.

“My sewing project is now completed Harry, I thought you might want to demonstrate it to the Professor.” That wasn’t a bad idea, Harry thought.

“Good idea Dobby, go get it.” Dobby left, and Murray looked at Harry quizzically.

“A sewing project that I would be interested in?”

“It’s right up your alley ma’am.....your former Auror alley that is.” Murray had looked briefly astonished, but then understood. Dobby came back with it:

It was a dragon’s hide vest, designed much in the style of a muggle Kevlar vest. It was designed that way after Harry saw one in a movie and decided he wanted a magical version for himself, using Charlie’s Christmas gift in part. He explained the concept to Murray.

“My foster brother Charlie Weasley gave me a piece of dragon hide for Christmas, he works in a dragon preserve in Romania. It wasn’t enough for a full vest, so Dobby has been making the rounds of black markets around the magical world to find a piece for the back. The sewing is what took the longest, there’s a specific way you have to go

about it, and it's quite time consuming." Dobby handed it to him, and he hefted it on.

"Feels like it weighs about 15 kilos, not too bad." That was 33 pounds, and was about as much extra weight as the very slim Harry could pack without giving him back issues.

"You don't look too stooped, all that time in the workout room is paying off."

"I do fly a couple times a month, last week I went out in that blizzard, a lot of fun." Murray had heard about that, part of the reason people liked Harry is that they thought he was a little 'off', and flying inside a blizzard was certainly proof of that. She walked up and tapped the vest with her fist, very strong it was indeed.

"You want to test it out?"

"If you don't mind, a nice stunner would do I think." She took out her wand and aimed it Harry's chest.

"No pictures of this, I don't want Winky hiding in here somewhere like you did with Snape."

"No pictures.....Help, she's attacking me, help!" Dobby dissolved in a fit of giggles from his position standing on one of the easy chairs, and Murray couldn't help but laugh herself. She calmed herself after a few seconds and let it rip:

"STUPEFY!"

From five feet away it hit Harry like a sledgehammer and knocked him a few feet and onto his back. She hurried over and found one important fact.

The stunner had not stunned him. Knocked the wind out of him for sure, but was still very conscious.

"Harry, are you okay?"

“My head smacked the ground pretty hard, but I’m okay.” She helped him up, grimacing at the extra weight.

“Maybe I should have been a little further away when I did that. Still, five feet away and you’re still awake, and I put a lot of power into it.”

“I do believe it works.” Harry, though out of breath, managed a few cackles.

“You mind if I try it?” Murray, in bare feet, was about three inches shorter than Harry, and while the vest wouldn’t be a perfect fit, it would be close enough.

“Be my guest.” She pulled it over her head, and stood 10 feet away from Harry this time. Harry had his wand trained on her, and again she was dead grateful that there were no pictures being taken here.

“You ready ma’am?” She nodded, and put a series of Cushioning Charms on the floor behind her.

“Give me all you’ve got Harry.” If only this was Dumbledore, Harry thought ruefully. He would give up half his vault in Gringotts for a shot like this at the old man, though he probably would go a little nastier than Stupefy.

“STUPEFY!”

When the Headmistress reflected back on this, she was grateful for the Cushioning Charms and that she had placed them as thoroughly as she had. Murray hit the deck so fast she didn’t know what hit her, but not for one second did she lose consciousness. Harry helped her up, and just to get a laugh.

“You can come out now Winky!” Murray jumped a little as Winky popped in.

“Yes Harry?”

“You didn’t.” Harry doubled over.

“No, I really didn’t, I can’t communicate telepathically with these two.” Murray acknowledged that she had been nailed, as a confused Winky popped back to the dorm room.

“Thank heavens for small favors. This vest is great Harry, how much did the other piece wind up running you?”

“A little over \$5,000 or so. Where did you wind up getting it Dobby?”

“In Singapore Harry, my tour of magical alleys was very educating.”

“That’s not a bad price, that kind of thing is difficult to find.” Indeed, Harry had been spending enough money that he was finally starting to get a little thrifty, with nothing but his interest from Gringotts coming in, financially speaking. He still had no intention of taking profits from WWW anytime soon, but was already planning on living on his Quidditch salary when the time came in 16 months.

“So I’m told, Charlie said he debated on giving it to me or Bill, but he told me that since I was the Weasley most likely to take a spell to the chest, I should get it. You’ll meet him at graduation next year I’m sure, he’s another great guy, the Weasleys are overflowing with them.” Hogwarts and Great Lakes graduations were a week apart, so lots of traveling for the adult Weasleys.

“Won’t he be coming to this years? Fred and George will be making the walk.” Harry made a face.

“I didn’t forget about them, let’s make sure they get through the ten weeks first.”

“Good point.” She checked her watch, it was now a little after 9:30, and she did have a thing or two to do before lunchtime.

“You can take the rest of the morning off if you want to Harry, go check on your plants or something.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that. I promise that I won’t Howler Dumbledore or any of his minions without telling you first.”

“Thank you Harry, let’s hope you don’t have to.” Harry didn’t comment on that part, tellingly.

“And thanks for this Professor Murray, it means a lot to me that I can come to you for sage advice.” In truth Murray liked Harry for being a nice kid, but also because his issues were always interesting, and provided some different experiences than she was used to with the other students.

“I’m available anytime Harry. Oh, one more question for you. How’s Jessica doing with her WWW work? All she says in her letters is that she’s doing ‘fine’, and that has a whole host of meanings.”

“She’s doing pretty well actually, she’s behind Steve Atwood by a decent margin, but from what I gather from Reiko’s parents, he’s using a lot of his free time to put up posters and go door to door. Jessica has no quota of course, but every time Dobby goes over there, she has at least a few orders to give him. Fred and George are very pleased with it, and are somehow managing to keep up with the orders.”

“Are they going to be ready to come over in April?”

“Yes ma’am, they say they’re looking forward to it. I hope they get into Cortez with me, but either way it will be great to have them around on a daily basis again. More than anyone, they’re my brothers.”

“Just between you and I Harry, I hope they get into Cortez too, even if you wipe out my Jeffersons at Quidditch.” Harry grinned at her.

“Oh we’ll do that anyway I’m sure, whatever Sally Jenkins might be capable of. If I might ask one last question of you: How is the war going?” Beyond what The Chronicle said, he didn’t have to mention.

“It’s proceeding sporadically, as all of ours seem to do. There have been a few small engagements between the Lycans and Kindred, mostly in San Francisco and environs, that’s a big Kindred area. Our Aurors are used mostly for intelligence gathering so far, they’ve not made any direct contact with the Lycan forces as of yet.”

“Are protective measures being increased around the schools and the Alleys?”

“Not any more than normal. We have anti-Lycan wards all over every magic-only area in America, and they stretch out to a quarter-mile radius in most instances.”

“Don’t they get tripped accidentally in the big cities?”

“No, pretty much every Lycan knows where our Alleys are, even if they can’t get inside them. There are no accidents in these cases Harry. Now run along and go relax, I’ll see you at lunch. Any further developments and I will let you know.”

“Have a good day ma’am.” He left the office a good deal calmer than when he had entered it.

Harry did take some time to check on his plants, and had a one sided conversation up there with Dobby, who supplied nothing more than some ‘yes Harry’, ‘you’re right Harry’, and ‘he was an evil man Harry’ type comments as Harry worked through some more of his Snape issues for about an hour. Dumbledore of course was mentioned, and even Dobby, whom Dumbledore had been very generous towards, had fully turned on the old man. At the hour mark, Harry found himself getting a bit hoarse, not to mention snowed upon, so he went back down to his trunk, where he did some plotting and planning.

The others joined him as their classes let out, and found Harry, as per usual, with some Dark Arts books open on his coffee table, and a

Dictating Quill taking some notes for him. Sophie, Reiko, and Drew got there first, having had two hour Advanced classes that morning, and all looked at him closely. Sophie took the first question.

“Are you okay Harry? What did Professor Murray want to talk with you about?” Harry had been wondering how much to divulge from that talk, but ultimately decided that there was nothing to it but to do it.

“She wanted to give me a chance to vent, lest you all listen to me rue the day I didn’t kill him myself.” That didn’t go over quite as badly as he had feared, given who it was that they were talking about.

“You wish you had done it?”

“Yes Reiko, I do. God help me, but I wish I had killed Severus Snape before Voldemort did.” None of the three had ever had anything remotely like a Snape experience once, let alone for five unrelenting years. They had all, individually in the case of Drew, and collectively with Sophie and Reiko, decided months ago that Snape had earned the vast amount of hatred that Harry had for him, and deserved any punishment that he got, even if it was meted out by Harry himself.

“He’s gone now Harry, he can’t torment you anymore.”

“Yes he is, and I am happy about it, though it probably doesn’t show too much right now. It’s just a lot to process.” Sophie sat next to him and took his hand in hers. And then made the mistake of looking at the book that Harry had been studying. Turning it over so that she could read the cover of the rather slim volume, she read out loud:.

“ ‘ How to Turn Your Foes Inside Out: Literally’ By Jarvis Caton-Stanford. Oh my God.”

“Not a title you’ll find in too many bookstores around the world.”

“And you’re about to tell us that it’s good too, aren’t you?” Harry saw where this was heading and wanted no part of it, his day had been stressful enough.

“Not with that expression on your face I’m not.” Reiko and Drew turned their heads so that Sophie wouldn’t see them smiling. She saw them do it, and a slight grin attached itself to her face as well.

“Your five pages of notes seem to belie that.”

“I prefer the word ‘interesting’ to the word ‘good’ You can get a lot out of most any Curse text, it’s all about being prepared.”

“For what?”

“For any eventuality Sophie. I won’t have to use them here, but if I ever go back there, I am a prime target and need to prepare accordingly.” Drew had a question, he had been looking over Harry’s notes.

“Wouldn’t you get arrested if you used most of this stuff? Some of these curses are one level below the Unforgivables.”

“That’s why I have Voldemort’s wand all trained up for me. Just in case.” Indeed Harry rarely left school without it, aside from that day at the Weasleys, never knowing when Voldemort might snap and order a hit on him.. No one wanted to address that topic, so they waited until the other three arrived and then went to lunch. Harry, surprisingly to some, was willing to talk about Snape during the meal to those from other tables who were bold enough to ask. He certainly didn’t admit to wishing he could have done the killing himself.....but he did tell a few stories, and rehashed his one duel with Snape in detail. Defense was the next class, with a rare lecture-only period, using the one textbook they had. They had about one of these classes a month, with no wand use, and Ripley was a good enough lecturer to get by with it. There was another mass duel type exercise planned for later in the month, though the rules for it had not been officially decided on, or so Ripley told them.

After dinner the seven of them played with Harry new vest, and it held up very well. It was not foolproof, as proven when a drunk with satisfaction Harry had all six of his friends try to stun him.....it

worked, but only with all six of them from within ten feet. He was out for a couple of seconds, and then came to by himself, which in itself was pretty impressive. The vest was wearable only by Harry, Drew, and the girls, as Jonas and Warrick were just too large to fit into it, as it had been made by Dobby with Harry's proportions in mind, with an inch of wiggle-room. Harry was still 5'7, so if he got to 5'9" one of the ladies would be getting a nice birthday or Christmas present.

He was fast asleep at 2:00 am when he felt Dobby tugging frantically on his shoulder. He reluctantly opened his eyes and saw a fairly panicked look on his major-domo's face. Harry stumbled out of bed and followed Dobby down into the trunk, where Fred was waiting for him with that day's copy of The Daily Prophet. The headline said it all.

“ Draco Malfoy missing from Hogwarts!” “Kidnapped student's mother accuses Dumbledore!”

Wednesday, January 25, 1997

Hogwarts Castle

8:00 am GMT

The faculty meeting room of Hogwarts was in turmoil as they read the Prophet stories. The owner of the paper, a closet Voldemort sympathizer, had printed his story before informing The Ministry of the situation, and Bones was expected any minute now. She, Rufus, and Travis were all aware that Malfoy wasn't there, but the paper printed the ransom note in full detail, and alleged that Dumbledore was the one who wrote it, though it of course was unsigned. Crabbe and Goyle had dutifully ignored Shepherd's instructions to keep quiet, and had given the paper an exclusive interview about their activities with Draco, though they had left out the heroin part. Dumbledore's various actions toward Harry were documented in painstaking detail, with heavy emphasis on the Dursleys. This had the added effect of showing that if Dumbledore could do these horrors to someone who by and large shared his views, what was he capable of doing to someone who hated his guts, as Draco certainly did. Dumbledore had rarely been so angry in recent memory, and had finally had enough of The Daily Prophet and its hatchet jobs on him. He quietly resolved to

ban The Daily Prophet from the school after this mess was settled, he would clandestinely fund a rival newspaper if he had to, the Dumbledore fortune was easily large enough to do this. Perhaps he would have a talk with Luna's father Bruce about such a venture, it was worth thinking about surely.

Bones and Biller appeared just before the faculty usually went into breakfast, and Dumbledore sent Sprout, McDowell, and Vector only to the Great Hall, to make sure that the students did not act up too much. The rest stayed behind as Bones addressed them.

"Now what I am about to say is off the record. We all know that Malfoy fils has been gone since Sunday night, and that you, with our acquiescence, held off telling Narcissa Malfoy until we were sure that he was not coming back. These are the facts of the case, and they are undisputed." As Smilin' Jack Ross might have put it.

"Now of course Dumbledore here did not take Malfoy, or allow him to be taken.....though the handwriting is a good match for yours Albus. What we need to do is prove that Voldemort and his people have Draco, nothing else should be our concern right now." Everyone seemed to be in agreement with this, though the 'how' part seemed to puzzle most of them. Bones passed around a copy of the ransom note, a quick and to the point document, with Tuesday's date on it.

To Whom it May Concern,

We have your son, the foolish brat who wandered away from safety. If you want him returned to you, you will deposit 1,000,000 galleons into the account I designate, and you will also swear a Wizard's Oath that publicly repudiates He Who Must Not Be Named. You will do this within a week, or your son will suffer the punishment. If you agree to these terms, then put a Dark Mark above your home on Saturday evening at 9:00 pm. If such a Mark is not displayed, then you will never see your son again.

The note was not signed, and everyone agreed that it sure looked like Dumbledore's writing, with which they were all long familiar with. The

man himself immediately figured out the forger part of it, and had to admire it as a job well done.

“What do you wish me to do Amelia?” The plan agreed on had been the result of an almost violent argument amongst Bones, Biller, Amos Diggory, and Rufus, but was the best that the four of them could come up with, in the ten minutes that they had had to work with.

“Albus, we need you to answer a few questions under Veritaserum. You will do so in front of a few key Wizengamot members, some Ministry Department Heads, and representatives of The Daily Prophet. I will ask the questions, and they will not delve too deeply, they simply bring out what we all know: that you do not have Draco Malfoy in custody, and do not know where he is.” Hill, the faculty member other than Shepherd who disliked Dumbledore the most, had a question.

“Are you sure that we should covering this up? It seems to me like the truth is best here: admit that we knew Malfoy was gone, but assumed that he was gone of his own volition and would come back. It may seem a little farfetched for some people, but better this than lying about it and getting caught.” McGonagall looked like she was going to respond heatedly, her color was up again, when Bones wisely interfered.

“That is exactly what we are going to do Professor Hill, eventually. Right now we need to take the focus off of Headmaster Dumbledore as a suspect, and poke a hole in Narcissa Malfoy’s story.”

“Why not just put her under Veritaserum? Her husband is a wanted man after all.”

“We will Minerva, though finding her might be a problem. If McCrae knows where she is, he’s not telling. She’s not at Malfoy Manor.” Augustus McCrae was the owner and publisher of The Daily Prophet, and was a not-so-distant cousin of both the Lestrangle brothers and Molly Weasley, proof of how close the pureblood mix was in Great Britain. His politics leaned much more toward the Dark side of his family tree, and he had had no trouble with the anti-Dumbledore and anti-Harry smear campaigns of the past. For his part. Dumbledore

was extremely wary of being asked any questions under Veritaserum, but saw no other way out of this for the moment. The Howlers would be arriving any minute now, if they hadn't already.

"When would you like me to do this Amelia?"

"Now Albus, I would like you to return with us to The Ministry. The WWW will carry the announcement of our findings live on the air, once you pass the Veritaserum test. After that, we will use every pressure we can bring on McCrae to retract the accusations in tomorrow's paper." Dumbledore nodded at her, and addressed his teachers.

"All of you are to keep to your normal schedules for the day, no matter how much disruption this may cause outside of Hogwarts, our students need your full attention. I will be back within the hour, and Hogwarts will run just like it always has." He swept out of the room, Bones and Biller hurrying after him, surprised at the swiftness of his exit.

The rest of the teachers, led by Remus and Flitwick, commenced a long discussion on what to do about future security issues, up to and including a lockdown of the castle after Quidditch practices were completed every afternoon. McGonagall was given her say of course, but she had been muted somewhat by the accusations against Dumbledore, and by her own widening chasm with the rest of the faculty. Her staunch support of every Dumbledore policy, which Remus had acidly noted in August, was beginning to wear on the rest of the teachers, who were increasingly bypassing her and dealing with Flitwick when it came to matters usually under her purview. It was widely believed amongst the teachers that Dumbledore would retire as soon as the Voldemort situation was resolved, but the undercurrent held that McGonagall was no lock to take over, though she was reasonably popular with the Hogwarts Board of Governors, the majority of whom had no ingrained loyalty to Dumbledore, Rufus, or Voldemort.

The Dumbledore interview, if one wants to call it that, took less than fifteen minutes of actual questioning under the controlled conditions

that Bones had promised him. He answered the questions in a way that exonerated him from suspicion, or so he and Bones thought. He admitted under the drug that he did not know where Draco was, and did not have any idea who might, other than Voldemort and his mother. Bones did not allow any questions from the observers, and even threw a Muting Charm at McCrae when he attempted to violate this part of the deal. Still, the dog and pony show seemed to satisfy most of the observers. Typical comments made afterward included:

“I knew you didn’t do it Albus.”

“Of course He Who Must Not Be Named has him.”

“The boy is just tormenting you Albus, punish him harshly when he comes back.”

Tellingly silent was McCrae, who left immediately, perhaps not noticing the multiple Tracking Charms that had been put on his person by practically every Ministry employee in the room. The room soon emptied of everyone but Bones and Dumbledore, with The Minister joining them a few seconds later.

“So you didn’t kidnap him after all Albus, that’s good to know.” Rufus was smiling, as if it was a joke, but Dumbledore had finally reached his limit.

“This whole thing is not funny Rufus!” The Minister just look at him calmly.

“Calm down Albus, you’ll give yourself a heart attack. You do understand why this was necessary don’t you? Look at that handwriting, I was becoming convinced myself.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence, Mr. Minister.” Rufus simply smiled at the insulting tone of voice, liking very much that the old man was becoming so agitated.

“You’re welcome Albus, my door is always open to you. After young Malfoy is found, and of course he will reappear by the fake deadline,

you and I will have to have a chat about your security at the castle. The fact that Malfoy and his bodyguards could slip out without detection so many times is cause for concern.” That Rufus was correct in no way made it easier for Dumbledore to digest.

“Where do you think he is Minister?”

“Oh with Voldemort and his people I’m sure. He’ll undoubtedly turn up with some bizarre story that still blames you, evidence or not.”

“So you’re not worried?”

“No I’m not, and you shouldn’t be either. This is Voldemort having some perverse fun with you, nothing more, nothing less. Now, if you will excuse me, I have an appointment to get to. I will see you tomorrow for our regular lunch meeting.” He left the room without waiting for an acknowledgement from Dumbledore, in something of a hurry since his meeting was in Australia, with Fudge. He was thinking so much on closing one controversial chapter that he barely gave this one any thought, since it appeared to be so cut and dried.

Dumbledore went back to his office and his paperwork, and awaited the storm of Howlers that he assumed he due for. The coverage given to the Howlers about Snape in July, and Harry’s campaign in November, had put the red envelopes back into vogue, not to mention the purple ones of Harry Potter’s DIY Howler Kit, which were all over the Great Hall and the various Common Rooms.

He was not disappointed, as roughly 75 Howlers greeted him before the day was over. He had them destroyed before listening to them of course, but was surprised to find their rate slowed to a trickle by the very next day. His total for the rest of the week did not equal that first day’s, and he began to relax a little, though he was still concerned that something may have happened to young Malfoy. He was still feeling that way on Saturday when Draco turned up.

Meanwhile, in Harry’s trunk at an ungodly hour:

“Oh please, this is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard of, who could possibly believe it?” Harry was now fully awake, more from laughing than anything else.

“Who knows Harry, but he’s still gone. We talked to Neville last night via owl, and he mentioned that Malfoy’s been sick the last few days, and that nobody’s seen him around. He just wrote it in passing, didn’t seem like he knew about any kidnapping.”

“I didn’t know that you two wrote Neville.” Neville hadn’t offered that tidbit in the two letters he had written Harry since Christmas.

“We have been since that day he and Luna came to the shop. We figured that Ron’s needs an eye kept on him, even if from afar, so we have Neville giving us a weekly report on him.”

“You don’t trust Hermione to do it? I thought you had swung around on her?” Fred rolled his eyes.

“She’s not objective when it comes to Ron and you know it. We’re doing this for Mum anyway, not for ourselves, let the dolt hang himself I say.” Fred and George hadn’t quite gone into Percy territory with Ron yet, but had no intention of interacting with him for the remainder of the Hogwarts year, the last ten weeks of which they would be at Great Lakes anyway.

“Anyhow, we’re all agreed that Draco’s hiding on purpose?”

“It sure seems that way, I mean, the three of us are no lovers of Dumbledore, but there’s no way he had the ferret kidnapped.”

“Yeah mate, this is just another smear campaign by your old friends at The Daily Prophet. Look, go back to bed, we’ll come get you again if we find out anything more.”

“Thanks guys.” Harry went back upstairs and was asleep within minutes, Warrick and the others not having noticed that he had been gone. He got the same questions as the day before, since his name

was mentioned in The Chronicle story as well. Harry gave the same bland answers, and affected a look of unconcerned nonchalance. It wasn't totally an act though, as he had spoken the truth at Lucius' trial: He really did not hate Draco Malfoy. He personally thought that the guy had just been raised badly, and if raised in a similar manner, Harry himself probably would have turned out the same way. As the week went on, he thought less and less about his erstwhile rival, and was only reminded when Draco turned up.

Saturday, January 28, 1997

Knockturn Alley, London

4:05 pm GMT

Peter Pettigrew and Anton Dolohov paced around in front of Borgin and Burkes, hoods over their heads and Polyjuice at the ready, just in case. The true ransom note, from Fenrir Greyback, had specified that Pettigrew and only one other be stationed here immediately after the ransom money had been deposited. Voldemort had expressly forbid anyone related to Draco to be there at the meeting point, fearing an incident that might lead to capture. Death he didn't much care about, but he didn't want to have to ransom back any more of his troops. The 'fee' was still 500,000 galleons, and with a bank balance of over 8 million galleons, Lucius' net worth wouldn't be impacted too much. Malfoy had made the banking arrangements as ordered, earlier in the day, and the two Death Eaters waited for Greyback's people to make contact so that they could pick up Draco.

The meeting place itself told the Death Eaters something very important: The werewolves had at least one Wizard in their ranks, since no muggle werewolf could see The Leaky Cauldron, much less get inside Diagon Alley. They discounted Remus, even they didn't believe that he would ever turn on Potter and Dumbledore both, and while they had theorized about magical werewolves, they had never known for sure one way or the other.

"Where are they Pettigrew? They were supposed to be here five minutes ago."

“They’re just trying to make us squirm Dolohov, they’ll be here.”

“What if they’re stiffing us? Making us pay the ransom and keeping the kid?”

“Then they would have asked for a lot more if that was their plan. Be patient.” Dolohov began muttering to himself, though Wormtail could tell that it was not about him. They waited another 15 minutes before a figure approached them.

It was Edward Grant, Greyback’s second in command, and a graduate 20 years earlier of The Michael Collins School, Ireland’s version of Hogwarts. Greyback had turned him right after that, though it seemed like much longer to the thirty-something Grant.

“Hello there Death Eaters.” Pettigrew nodded at him, and dispensed with any other pleasantries.

“Where is Draco, we fulfilled our part of the bargain.” Grant had no interest in wasting time here either.

“He is now quite near where we found him.” Pettigrew couldn’t believe it, as Dolohov put his hand on his pocketed wand.

“You brought him back to the Quidditch Pitch?”

“Not exactly, we dropped him at the Hogwarts front door a couple of minutes ago. I’m sure Dumbledore will look after him nicely. Thank you for paying so promptly though, we needed the money.” With that last salvo, Grant ran about ten steps and then disappeared, foiling the anti-portkey and anti-apparition wards that Pettigrew had hastily thrown up before the meeting. Dolohov looked at Pettigrew, his superior in the chain of command.

“So what the hell do we do now?” Pettigrew had no clue.

“I’m not aware that we can do much of anything at the moment Dolohov.”

“Can’t you go over there as a rat and look around?”

“Not anymore, they have Animagus wards all over the place there, I can’t get within half a kilometer of that castle without tripping them. Even McGonagall has to watch where she steps when she goes outside. No, we need to return home and inform our Master of these developments.” They were away a few minutes later, bracing himself for Voldemort’s reaction..

Voldemort did not take kindly to the news that his well laid out scheme was about to blow up in his face due to some doubly backstabbing animals. He knew that young Malfoy would immediately be put under Veritaserum and Dumbledore would know where he really had been the last six days. He sent for Lucius and Narcissa and informed them of the news.

“Should I go over there Master?”

“No Narcissa, they might just arrest you for planting that ransom note. At the very least they will put you under Veritaserum questioning, and we cannot have that. Your sister will have to be the family point person with Draco, at least for the next few weeks until he reaches his majority.” Draco’s 17th birthday was on March 12th.

“You mean Andromeda would be his guardian?” Tonks’ mother she meant.

“She is his closest relative that can be produced, neither of you can do it, nor can Bella. I know what you think of your sister, and I happen to agree with you, but she is the only one available. Besides, Dumbledore will be making all the decisions anyway. Now go back to whatever it was that you were doing. If any news comes in, I will send for you.”

“Thank you Master, come along Narcissa.” Lucius pulled her by the arm, and they could be heard arguing in the hallway as they left. Voldemort cast a glance at Pettigrew, the only other person left in the room.

“We may have another situation to deal with soon Wormtail, begin making some preliminary plans.”

“Yes Master.”

Flashback to 4:00 pm GMT

Hogwarts Castle

The two werewolves, in their unnatural form, quickly dragged the unconscious body of Draco Malfoy up to the front door and deposited it there. They each pounded three times on the door, and then fled as fast as they could into the Forbidden Forest, where a few Centaurs on patrol came upon them and engaged them in battle, killing one and taking the other prisoner. Bane, the Centaur in command, declined a suggestion to inform the Wizards of their great victory. He was content with the non-interaction they had with Dumbledore and his people, particularly since the traitor Firenze was still in the old man's employ. Greyback never found out what happened to them, and had to change a lot of his long-term contingency plans, and his own base of operations, just in case.

Filch happened to be nearest to the door, and opened it to find young Malfoy laying there. Not daring to touch the lad, he yelled as loud as he could for help. Remus and Flitwick were nearest, walking together toward the library as they heard Filch's bellowing. They came at a run, and found Filch kneeling by the lad. Draco had bruises, cuts, and other marks all over his face and hands, he was wearing the same clothes as he had Sunday night. Filch had screwed up enough nerve to check his pulse, and found one.

“He's alive Professors, I don't know any more than that.”

“Mr. Filch, please go inform the Headmaster that we are taking him to the Infirmary.” The caretaker left at a run, as Flitwick levitated Draco and the two of them walked as quickly as possible to the Infirmary. Pomfrey reacted with a slight scream as she saw the damage, and after Draco was stripped, saw that the injuries were

over his entire body. Dumbledore came in at a run, followed closely by McGonagall and Shepherd, who arrived separately seconds apart.

“What happened to him?” Remus motioned at the injuries.

“He was tortured Albus, I would think this is obvious.” Shepherd, with his flair for understatement, said what they were all thinking.

“This is not magical torture.” Pomfrey ignored them all as she shoved potion after potion down Draco’s throat, muttering out loud about which to use next, and how much. Remus was examining the body closely, disgusted by what he was looking at, but at the same time fascinated.

“It looks like they used a belt, some rope, and a muggle weapon called a taser, which emits an electrical charge, a soft version of Cruciatus. That’s just from what I can tell right off.”

“Voldemort would do that to him? The Malfoys are his most ardent supporters.” Dumbledore had a different idea.

“I don’t think Voldemort and his people did this Minerva, this was muggle damage done by muggles.” Shepherd again:

“Or werewolves perhaps? We did hear the rumors of the Death Eaters and Greyback falling out.” Silence filled the room, as the taser marks, or what Remus thought were taser marks, took on a new and deadly import. Pomfrey drew some blood from Malfoy, and went over to her work station to do some tests on it.

“Minerva, we will put the castle into lockdown at the start of dinner every day from now on. The Diagon Alley tripped planned for two weeks from now is cancelled except for the sixth and seventh year students, who will go heavily chaperoned.”

“We need to inform his mother.” Dumbledore and Voldemort were in agreement on this point, as Dumbledore tone of voice took an ugly turn.

“No, Narcissa Malfoy does not deserve that courtesy from us after the smear campaign she and McCrae initiated against me and our school. Inform Andromeda Tonks, she will act as Draco’s guardian while he is injured. If Narcissa does not like it, she can show her face here and explain why. Then we will have a little chat with her.” Dumbledore, as Head of the Wizengamot, had arrest powers in his portfolio. McGonagall went off to floo Andromeda, while the three men alternately watched Pomfrey and Draco. After about 10 minutes, and McGonagall’s return with Draco’s Aunt, Pomfrey returned with some preliminary results.

“His blood shows signs of massive infection, as well as narcotic withdrawal. I’m going to give him another potion that will keep him unconscious for a time, it will speed the healing process.”

“What about werewolf antibodies?”

“It is too soon to tell Remus, that test will take another hour or so. Given the marks I’ve seen, I would consider it likely that he has been turned.” Dumbledore turned to Shepherd.

“Charles, I think you should start making a double portion of Wolfsbane from now on.”

“Of course Headmaster, I usually make more than is necessary anyway, just in case. Draco will have enough for the next full moon.” Andromeda didn’t say a word the entire time, not really knowing how to react. This was the first time she had seen Draco up close in years, and was not at all prepared to be making any decisions about him. Add to that the likely retribution from her sisters.....well so far Andromeda and Ted Tonks had been protected of a sort from Death Eater machinations, but now?

Dumbledore left to inform The Ministry, and returned with Bones just in time to get the results from the latest blood tests.

“I’m sorry, but Draco is positive for the werewolf antibody. He is now a werewolf.” The room went very still as the implications of that hit them. Remus took the bull by the horns and addressed them all.

“Well, we have a repeat of what happened over 25 years ago, and a decision to make: What do we tell the rest of the students and the public? Do we protect him, as you did me all those years ago? Or do we attempt to educate them on the benefits of Wolfsbane and how it doesn’t pose a problem for them if he takes it?” No one had an immediate answer to that, though all of them, save Shepherd perhaps, privately thought that if this was any student but a hardcore Slytherin, the choice would easily be to hide his secret for another 17 months.

“That is the question of the moment Remus, but it is not one that we have to decide right this minute. Poppy, how long will you want to keep him unconscious?”

“At least a few days, perhaps much longer, he has over two dozen broken bones, and a number of contused organs. If this was a muggle teenager, the injuries would have been fatal long before they got so numerous.”

“Amelia?”

“I see no harm in waiting until he regains consciousness. Will you bring any discipline on him for his activities?”

“No Amelia, I think we can all agree that he has been punished enough, and learned lessons for a lifetime.” That was the final word, and Dumbledore went back to his office. The students were told at dinner time that night, but no visitors were allowed, and Draco was moved to a private room off of Dumbledore’s office. Andromeda was the only one to see him outside the staff, though she did not tell Dumbledore that she had been in communication with her sister, updating her on his condition, though not about the werewolf issue. There was nothing wrong with what she was doing, but the old man would not have appreciated it if he knew. Ironically, Draco now had a rather large fortune in his own right, as he was Snape’s only heir, and had inherited over a million galleons and Snape Manor from his former teacher.

Draco's injuries healed very slowly, and he was kept under for a total of three weeks. He missed being awake for the next full moon, but his body did not seem to care, and went through the change anyway. He had been force-fed Wolfsbane just in case, and the night went as well as could be expected. He would awake the day after Valentine's Day, his subconscious mind fighting through the sleeping potions. His reaction to his condition would be very telling.

The public reaction to the news was muted, and Draco turning up changed very few minds over who was to be blamed. The ones who hated Dumbledore thought it was a little too convenient that the young man had turned up where he did. Those who supported Dumbledore were vindicated as well, assuming that their hero had done something to get him back. Unfortunately the Centaurs did not read The Daily Prophet, or they could have cleared this up in a few moments. Tensions had subsided a little, but would likely flare up again once Draco told his story.

Sunday, January 29, 1997

Great Lakes Outer Perimeter

1:30 pm EDT

Today was Drew's birthday, and before his parents arrived to have dinner with him and his friends, he, Harry, and Dobby and Winky went on a hike.

To look for Crumple Horned Snorkacks.

The others had begged off for various reasons: Warrick had to study; Reiko had to type Harry's Muggle Studies paper, which he had written out; Sophie had the flu, and wouldn't go outside with a wand to her head; Jonas and Claudia just flat out refused, saying that even they weren't that crazy. Still, Harry had promised Luna that he would give it a shot, and Dobby and Winky didn't mind, nor did Drew. With Murray's permission, the two young men set out, promising to be back before dinner. She didn't know about Dobby and Winky going though, so much for stealth if they came across anyone, even though the two small ones were instructed to disappear if any cars came by.

They were about a mile out, laden with coats and Warming Charms, when Drew looked over at Harry.

“What are we even looking for?” He had never even heard of them, not that anyone in the gang had besides Harry, and he only because of Luna.

“Hanged if I know Drew, you have to know Luna to appreciate it.”

“You make her sound pretty cool, we need someone like that here.” Yes they did, Harry sometimes reckoned that he himself was the closest person to mimicking Luna’s personality, at least among the students he was around most. He wondered if that was being English among a crowd of Americans. At present he was the only foreigner in the school, though Jessica had told him that there were a few at Salem, still considered the flagship American school.

“No one like that in Jefferson?”

“Not really, it would probably get stamped out early on. She and Neville are pretty tight?” Harry’s eyes went way up, this was a development.

“So far as I know.” That didn’t deter him.

“Well if that changes I wouldn’t mind a heads up, she sounds like someone I’d like to meet.” This would bear watching, as Harry planned to have at least Neville and Luna over for part of the summer. Drew didn’t stick around for the summer sessions, but that was easily arranged.

“No problem, she’s a really cool person, I wish I would have appreciated her friendship more last year when I had the chance.” While on the subject of Hogwarts females:

“Has Hermione written you yet? Is she still pissed about the spinning?” Harry had shown him the incident via pensieve.

“Once, it was four sentences, and if it wasn’t in her handwriting I would have sworn that Ron wrote it.”

“Maybe he did.” That thought had occurred to Harry upon reading the note. He conceded a minor point.

“We did kind of overdo it with the snowballs, and I said as much in my letter to her, sort of.” He had danced around the subject really, as he didn’t want Ron to start gloating about anything, but he had thought that Hermione would get the gist of it. Apparently not.

“Sounds like it, but it also sounds like she’s overreacting.”

“She’s sticking up for her boyfriend, I can’t blame her for that. Hermione is very loyal, and Ron and I made her choose, and she chose him.” It had always been like that, Harry had reflected. No matter how stupidly Ron behaved towards anyone, Hermione always had his back. Well, except for when Ron thought that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, there was always an exception.

They were now totally out of sight of the school, unless one used Harry’s Omnioculars, which he had on him. He didn’t really expect to find anything, but at least he could tell Luna that he gave it a shot. Besides, he figured that some fresh air wouldn’t kill him, hopefully, and he had never really gotten a good look at his surroundings, except from the air on his broom. With winds whipping around right now, a broom was not a good idea. The snow wasn’t too thick on the ground surprisingly enough, and they didn’t have to stick to the road.

“You really never dug her like that? Sounds like you suit her better than Ron does.”

“I might have felt that way eventually, who knows. I think someone needs maturity to fully appreciate Hermione in that way. And don’t say it, I agree that Ron isn’t mature, I think he just likes having his life run for him, and Hermione is more than willing to go along with that. I wouldn’t have been, at least not to that degree.”

“And you’re not like that with Sophie? That’s what Warrick keeps saying.”

“He’s one to talk, sheesh. Reiko is in charge there, trust me mate. And just because you don’t see Sophie and I argue, doesn’t mean that it never happens.”

“Very discreet, I can understand that.” Harry then asked something that he had long been curious about.

“Did you ever have a thing for Sophie? She seems like your type.” The quiet type he meant, though the sudden Luna interest was causing him to re-evaluate.

“Honestly?” Uh oh, Harry instantly regretted asking now.

“Yeah.”

“No.” Said so simply that both of them started laughing.

“Ah, so my girlfriend’s not good enough for you eh? Eh?” He was smiling as he said it, and Drew just shook his head and tried to put it as diplomatically as possible.

“Look, just because Jonas and I weren’t buddies all those years, doesn’t mean I didn’t hear things. I heard how she and Claudia were about boys, and I decided early on that it was just too much trouble.” That didn’t really answer the question very well, but it was good enough for Harry.

“I’ve heard that before from other people, including Claudia herself.” Drew flinched at hearing that, and attempted to head off trouble at the pass.

“Please don’t try to set me up with her.” Harry snickered.

“I thought about that for about 20 seconds last Fall, then abandoned it.”

“Thank you doesn’t seem to quite cover it.”

“She’s not that bad Drew.” The other lad couldn’t agree more.

“As a friend, not at all, as long as we’re in a group setting.” Harry could certainly relate to that, when he and Claudia were alone, which was pretty rare, they retreated into talks about History and the like, their common study interest.

“I hardly ever spend any time with her alone, so that’s the only situation where I see her.”

“So I’ve noticed, you have the trunk. Easy to have privacy if you want it.”

“Are you thinking of asking your parents for one for graduation?”

“They make good money Harry, but it’s not that good. Even if Mom gets to be President in a couple of years, we still won’t be wealthy.”

“What about you, are you still set on becoming an Auror?”

“It’s a nice fallback in case I don’t think of anything I’d like to do more. The idea of following in Dad’s footsteps is a little daunting though.”

“Is he next to take over from Jacobsen?” Mike Jacobsen was the American Head Auror that Harry had met after the trial battle.

“I don’t think so, Patrick O’Brian, who runs the San Francisco office, is next in line, or so the betting goes. Or they might ask Shupe back, he was pretty popular when he was there.” Salem Headmaster Beau Shupe had spent 25 years alternating between Auror duties and teaching.

“What about you? Something tells me that you won’t be joining me at the Academy.”

“Would they even take me? I’m not an American after all, and wouldn’t I need to be here for awhile to become a citizen?”

“They would let you in, since you graduated from an American school. And I think it’s six years to become a citizen, but I wouldn’t bet any money on it, could be a year more or less.”

“Well I think I’ll want the easy life of being a Quidditch star, at least for a couple of years.”

“Here or back in Britain?” Harry was quiet for a minute, as he tried to frame this.

“I don’t think I’ll be welcomed back in Britain Drew, at least not with too many open arms.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I didn’t realize at the time, what taking off for here would mean for me over there. A lot of people took it as an affront, like I was saying that I was too good for Britain or something like that. Add that to the shots I’ve taken at Dumbledore and McGonagall, privately and publicly. They’ve more or less put up with them since they believe in the Prophecy, but afterwards? I don’t know really.”

“Yeah, but didn’t they deserve those shots?” They did, but Harry was shaking his head anyway.

“It’s not the same mate, it’s not because I was over here when I took them. If I had stayed there and done it, it would have looked a lot better.”

“You were under their power while you were at Hogwarts, you couldn’t afford to tell them what you thought.”

“Semantics Drew, at least to most of the public.”

“And if you take out Voldemort?” Harry laughed cynically.

“They’ll just bitch that I didn’t do it sooner.”

“So this exile is permanent?”

“It depends on what happens during the next 13 months. I had Fred and George check for me, and I have to declare for next year’s Quidditch Draft by March 31st of next year, with the draft being 90 days later. That’s when I have to decide, when I have to choose. Sophie will be a big factor there, I don’t dare take her back to Britain with me, assuming she would even be willing to go, and that is definitely not a safe assumption.” The subject had not really come up specifically, with Harry just assuming that she would resist it.

“They did send her a few Howlers didn’t they.”

“Oh that was to be expected, even if I had wound up with a British girl as my first girlfriend. Except Cho maybe, they would have been satisfied there I think, her being the female star of the school and all.”

“How did she like her Howlers?” Harry made a face.

“I was not happy when I found out about that let me tell you, and I told Sophie and Reiko as much. I wrote her and apologized for it, I think she believed me when I said that I had nothing to do with it. She wrote back as much, but it was a chilly letter to be sure.”

“Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?” The famous line from Henry II, as seen by the boys in the movie Beckett.

“Yeah, I did let loose the dogs, I suppose I am to blame when they gore somebody.”

They stopped for some hot cocoa from their thermoses, and took some time to look around, with and without Omnioculars. They didn’t see much, just a few cars here and there, and a few planes overhead.

No people were visible, and certainly nothing that could qualify as a Snorkack.

“Why are we out here again?”

“You’re getting some fresh air, I’m keeping a promise to a friend. Dobby and Winky are just crazy.”

“If not for Warming Charms the fresh air wouldn’t be doing me much good.”

“Isn’t it nice to be a Wizard?”

“I wouldn’t trade places with most muggles, no.”

“Would you rather be a muggle billionaire or an average money earning Wizard?” This was a common debate amongst teenage Wizards.

“The billionaire probably. You could afford so many gadgets and toys that it almost makes up for not being able to do magic. I know this though, the billionaire would pick being a Wizard.” Harry laughed.

“I bet they would too. I would still be a Wizard I think, I can’t wait to be out of school and not have to worry about rules and things like that, and be able to do whatever magic I want to.”

“A lot of kids our age feel that way, I’m surprised as many of us go to muggle colleges as we do, with that attitude.”

“You’re not tempted to go?”

“No, I don’t especially want to work in the muggle world, and there’s no point in college if you don’t. And you?”

“I’m waiting to see if Sophie signed me up for the SAT’s or not. If she did, I’ll take them and explore my options, if not, then I won’t.”

Drew was looking around with the Omnioculars, and spotted something in the distance.

“What did you say these things looked like?” Harry was looking at his watch, mentally debating on how long he had to be out there to fulfill his promise to Luna.

“I have no idea.....hang on, did you see something?” Drew handed him the Omnioculars and pointed out a shape in the distance. Harry magnified them as much as he could, and saw something crawling across the ground about a mile away. He couldn’t make out exactly what it was, but he was no animal expert either way. He could tell that it wasn’t crawling very fast over the snow, but nothing should be outside in this weather should it?

“I’ll make you a deal Drew, we go find out what that thing is, then we go home.”

“I was about to suggest the same thing, let’s go.”

“Dobby, Winky, go pop next to whatever that is and make sure it doesn’t dive into any holes, okay?”

“Right Harry.” They went away, and Harry could see them in the distance with the Omnioculars. Harry and Drew quickened up the pace, and got there in about 15 minutes, not bad time considering that it was below zero degrees Fahrenheit outside. When they got there, they found Dobby and Winky excitedly chattering while following a slow moving turtle.

Except that it wasn’t a turtle, though it shared the same speed. It was about a foot long, half again as wide, and very furry, with 5 legs on each side, and it was black all over.....which was probably how Drew had been able to spot it against the white background. It was ignoring Dobby and Winky, who were a little too scared to try and touch it. Harry had never seen anything remotely like it, and judging by the look on Drew’s face, he hadn’t either.

“Um Harry, what is this?”

“I have no bloody idea Drew. Winky, if you will.” Winky took a roll of film on the creature, as the sucker was going about a two feet a minute in speed. She got it from all angles, and also had Dobby, Harry, and Drew squat around it for some photos. While Harry squatted down next to it, he did see what could be called horns on it’s head, though he couldn’t be sure.

“Luna said that we would know it when we saw it, but I just have a hard time believing that we found one this easily. This has got to be some muggle animal that our fifth grade muggle educations just never got around to explaining.” Drew just shook his head.

“I don’t know if this is muggle or magical, though it looks like something out of a movie. Maybe we should put a tracking charm on it, see where it goes. At this rate we can’t follow it home, we would be here the rest of the week.” Harry had changed his mind, for no good reason, about what it was.

“Agreed, the pictures alone should be enough for now. This thing has to be magical, it and the four of us are the only things crazy enough to be outside right now. And that doesn’t look like a ton of fur to keep it warm.”

“Either way this should make her happy.”

“Go ahead and do the Tracking Charm, your first magic outside of school.”

“Well not the first, I did some stuff over the summers, but only inside my dad’s building. But here goes:” He put the Tracking Charm on the creature, which they quickly decided to call a Snorkack, and watched it shuffle away, very slowly.

“You know if it was 20 degrees warmer I would be game to follow it for awhile.”

“How far out are we?”

“Probably four miles or so, it’s hard to tell. I recognize some of this from being in the air, thank goodness we have our footprints to guide us back.”

“That would be a fun thing to explain, why we were late.”

“Oh I would just have Dobby go get mine and Warrick’s brooms for us, and we could fly home.”

“And pray we didn’t run into any muggles along way?”

“Well there are hiccups in every situation Drew. Winky, Dobby, go ahead and get the film developed. Make three copies of each photo: One for us, one for Luna, and one for that Journal she told me about. Don’t go to her until we get back, I’ll want to write a note.....No, scratch that, both of you sneak into the castle and fill her in.” Dobby and Winky nodded vigorously and were about to take off when Harry stopped them, looking sideways at Drew.

“Hey, don’t tell her about Drew being interested in her, with my luck Neville will be sitting there.” The elves both started giggling and agreed that mum was indeed the word. They left, and the two boys started back for school. They spent the 90 minute walk talking about who to target next for pranking, though Harry still didn’t share their unofficial permission from Murray. He was worried that Claudia especially would think that he had come to some kind of arrangement with her, and he couldn’t be having that now could he?

They arrived back at school exhausted, but glad that they had gone. They stopped by Jefferson first to see if Drew’s parents were there yet, but they weren’t, so Drew shucked his coat and sweater off, and they went down the trunk to see the pictures. Sophie was asleep on the couch, her Transfiguration notebook having fallen to the floor.

Winky and Dobby were gone, but they had left a set of the photos behind as Harry had asked them to. They had turned out beautifully, and Harry couldn’t resist waking Sophie up to show her. After a few seconds resistance, she opened her eyes and sat up.

“You guys actually found something out there?”

“Something is the right word. Look.” A few yawns later, she had been asleep for about two hours, she looked over the pictures.

“I’ve never seen anything like this, what is it?”

“That’s the question of the day darling, we have no idea either. Hopefully Luna will, Dobby and Winky are over there right now.”

“Isn’t it pretty late in Scotland right now?”

“Nothing is too late for science, right Drew.” Drew nodded dutifully.

“Right, what he said.”

“Careful Drew, he’s pulling you into his web of insanity.”

“You were the first one snared by it dearest, it’s too late to complain now.”

“Have I ever complained? Don’t answer that.” Harry was about to make something up, but decided to let it be for now.

“Yes dear.” She patted him on the hand and turned to her other friend.

“So Drew, are you glad you went? Kind of a strange birthday present.” Somewhat strangely, Drew agreed that he was glad.

“It was fun Sophie, though a lot more fun than it would have been if we hadn’t found something.”

“Success compensates for a lot of hassles.”

“What fortune cookie did you find that little pearl of wisdom in?”

“Don’t start darling.”

“Give him his real present would you?”

“Oh sure, ruin the moment. Drew, the hike was not a present of course, the six of us went in together and got you some CD’s, imports I believe they call them, from back in Britain. I had Bill pick them out, he’s the one I know over there that’s most into muggle music.” He went over to his bookshelf and took the Disguising Charm off one of the volumes, to reveal a 10 CD box set, filled with the kind of alternative music that Drew was into, with 10 different bands being represented.

“Thanks guys, this is really great.” He shook Harry’s hand and gave Sophie a hug. His CD collection now cracked the 100 mark, Harry had made sure that Drew didn’t have any of the gifted discs.

Just then, the elves came back in, and both had large smiles on their faces.

“Well, was it a Crumple Horned Snorkack?”

“No Harry, she seemed quite certain that it was not a Crumple Horned Snorkack.” All three teenagers were waiting expectantly.

“Well what did she think it was?”

“She called it a Four Tooth Gimmerslammer.” Silence filled the room as Harry, Sophie, and Drew rolled that around in their heads. Drew was the first to find his voice.

“I’m sorry Dobby, could you repeat that please?”

“A Four Tooth Gimmerslammer.” It should go without saying that none of the three humans had ever heard of it.

“And is it totally rare or otherwise having some scientific value?”

“She said it was somewhat rare, found only in cold climates again, and that she would forward the photos and an essay about them to the Journal for Obscure Creatures. She said that you and Drew would get full photo credit and for the discovery.” Harry shook his head.

“Well you took the pictures Winky, you should get credit.” Her photos for The Daily Prophet with Snape had gone unaccredited, over Harry’s later objections to the paper.

“No Harry, it was your camera, you could just as easily have taken the photos yourself.” That was a long speech for Winky, even in front of people she was familiar with. She sounded resolute though, so Harry chose not to belabor the point.

“All right Winky, if you say so....and only because you say so.” She nodded furiously.

“What else did Luna say Dobby?”

“She is writing you all a letter, I am to pick it up during lunchtime there tomorrow afternoon. She remembered that Harry said to let The Quibbler have it first, and she will send an owl to her father about it. Oh, and she said that it was very sweet of us four to go out and look for the Crumple Horned Snorkack like we did, it means a lot to her.” Harry and Drew smiled, though probably for different reasons. Harry liked Luna a lot, mostly for entertainment value mind you, but also for that she was very loyal and asked for almost nothing in return. She technically hadn’t even asked him for the field trip, just to keep an eye out. There was nothing romantic between Harry and Luna, but it was notable that his letters to her were longer than any other, and likewise hers were the longest to him as well, especially now that Hermione was giving him the freeze.

Drew was thinking/hoping that Luna and Neville would hit a bad patch, or that Luna would see the light and accept Harry’s Great Lakes offer. The more he thought about it, the more he dug her, sight unseen, though Harry did have a couple of pictures of her in his photo album. Sophie was the only skeptic here, but only for a slight reason:

“A Four Tooth Gimmerslammer.....she made that up, c'mon.” Very little of Harry's library, housed in the first two of the four rooms of the trunk, dealt with magical creatures, so that probably would not be an option for verification.

“Who knows Sophie, either way, Drew and I will be featured in The Quibbler pretty soon.” Drew had always made a point to read Harry's copies of the paper, and both boys looked pretty pleased with the prospect.

“My parents will be very proud.”

“Your mom can use it when she campaigns, proof that her son is more than just a scholar.”

“Yes, Drew Baylor, future Auror and full-time adventurer.”

“Make sure that the words ‘Four Tooth Gimmerslammer’ appear somewhere in the campaign literature, it's an eye opener.” They all started giggling, though Sophie had to stop after it made her start coughing. They hung out for a little while longer, until Jonas hollered down that Mitchell and Hollie Baylor had arrived. They exited the trunk as Jonas was fully explaining the Pink to Drew's parents, who were both impressed, and also very careful to hang on to someone as they left the room.

The gang and the Baylor parents had an enjoyable time getting to know one another, as only Harry, Jonas, and Mitchell had ever met Mitchell, two and four times respectively. Hollie Baylor, mother of three and Congresswoman the past eight years, had gone to The Pathfinder School along with her husband, and they had been friends, though not sweethearts, while having nearly every class together over their seven years of school. They had met again a few years after graduation, and Cupid did his work quite quickly, with marriage, and eldest daughter Hannah coming within two years.

Hollie and Mitchell were very pleased that Drew had finally made some good friends at school, though Mitchell had done a thorough background check on Harry when Drew had first mentioned him in a

letter, back in September. They didn't have a birthday present per se for their son, but said that this year's and next year's present would be rolled into one after graduation: They would get him a car, any nice one with a reasonable price tag is how they put it. Neither of them owned one, both using government cars during the rare times they needed them for work. Drew was very pleased, and was already thinking of places to go around Boston, where the American Auror Academy was located.

The Baylors left a couple of hours later, content that their son seemed so happy. They promised to return, as they did every year, for The Olympics in May. Drew had scored the third most points of anyone in the last one, regardless of year, and was a favorite to take the overall title this time, though Harry was the wildcard.

Over the next two weeks little happened of note for our American based players. Classes were attended; Sophie's flu was helpfully passed on to all but Jonas, who never seemed to get sick; Harry's vest was tested a few more times, using combinations of spells by multiple users, the vest passing every test it was given; and a few light pranks were accomplished, most notably a stunt whereby the floor surface of the fourth floor was made very slick with a nice Polishing Charm that Harry had found in one of his more tame books. He had also laid down Cushioning Charms all over the floor too, so students would slip and slide, but be bounced right up, unhurt. Why the fourth floor was chosen was never established publicly, but it marked the first time that any of the Marauders signed their work: Prongs, Madmartigan, and Half Pint did the honors, in easily removable paint along one of the walls. Riley Poole put on a huge show of complaining about it, but Harry had in fact gotten his advice on what kind of paint to use. Murray was suitably amused, and her hands-off policy continued unabated.

Friday, February 14, 1997

Valentine's Day

Charms Classroom C

3:45 pm EDT

“Okay, ladies, given that you have some serious dance preparation to do, go ahead and take off. Guys, do some more practicing until 4:00 pm.” Maloney had hinted ahead of time that she would do something like this, and none of the guys seemed too upset by it. Harry, Jonas, and Drew were working on the multiple person Charms that had been discussed the previous month, and were now concentrating on putting up a solid shield, with Jonas taking as many shots at it as he could. They vaguely heard her instructions, and didn’t notice Sophie and Reiko leave.

It took Jonas five shots with Reducto to the same spot on the shield to even put a crack in the all metal shield, a much stronger shield than any of them had been able to put up individually. Harry usually didn’t spend much time with solid shields, but now with the Lycan war going strong he did more work with metal and composite shields, which could deflect thrown objects and some bullets. Apparently Tyson had been wrong about that, though perhaps he had been speaking metaphorically. After Drew took a turn, needing four Reductos to show a crack, Harry took aim, from ten feet away.

“Give it all you have Harry.” He focused for a second, as everyone stopped to watch:

“REDUCTO!”

The light flashed and slammed into the inch thick steel shield, moving Drew and Jonas back a few feet as they absorbed the shockwave. At first nothing seemed to happen, but upon inspection, a hairline crack was right there where Harry’s spell had struck it. It was a smaller crack than Drew’s, but done much earlier. Maloney came over to look at it.

“That is very impressive Harry, I can’t wait to see what you can do in the Olympics.” Jonas, who had always had a crush on Maloney, put his two cents in.

“Care to have a try Professor?” She raised her eyebrows at him.

“A dare huh? Well I don’t see why not. Harry, you join them to conjure up the strongest shield you can.” He did so, and with all the boys watching, Maloney lazily put up her wand:

“Reducto!”

Not as loud as Harry, but just as effective. The crack was a little bigger than his, with a stronger shield that she had hit.

“Wow, are you sure that Defense was only your second best subject ma’am?” She smiled at him, it was quite a smile and Harry was half tempted to throw his Occlumency shields up to protect him from it. All the teachers had their favorites, and Harry appeared to be Maloney’s. Sophie didn’t seem to mind, so Harry found it kind of nice in all, though Jonas good naturedly groused about it on occasion.

“A close second Harry. Now off with you all, I want you all looking your best for the dance.” They departed, with Harry peeling off to Cortez, Jonas and Drew to Jefferson. Warrick, Rick, and Terry weren’t getting ready, but were talking about getting ready. Harry was going to wear his electric green robes, having won an agreement from Sophie that he should express his individuality. A hard won agreement of course, but Harry finally called in a few chits just for the hell of it. The big chit was Sophie insisting that he not buy her anything, saying that her birthday was soon enough, and that he had bought too much at Christmas. Harry agreed, candy only, if she put up no more fuss about his robes. Sensing that she was being swindled somehow, a reluctant Sophie agreed.

“You’re really wearing those things?” From Warrick, as Harry pulled them out of the first compartment of his trunk.

“For the 54th and final time, why shouldn’t I?”

“Because they look hideous, that’s not enough?”

“Says you, every once in a blue moon I like to please myself thank you very much.....not that kind of pleasing Rick, don’t even go there.”

“Uh huh, right.”

“Hey, just because I’m not public about it, like some people we might mention.” That kept Rick and Terry quiet about that subject. Clancy was only cooperative about such matters under threat, the one threat he was intimidated by, and Rick and Terry had quickly been apprised that Harry didn’t care a whit what they did behind the privacy of their bed curtains, so their girlfriends were pretty much there every night. They also appreciated the Winky cleaning touch, the great food sent to their table was a very nice perk to having Harry as a roommate.

Everyone besides Harry was dressed as they were for the Christmas Dance, which of course was less than two months previous. Harry resisted temptation to dye his hair red, in honor the ‘holiday’, he decided that Sophie was being tested enough for one month. Sophie and Reiko looked very much as they did at the last Dance as well, and Harry really, really wanted to skip the festivities and snog his brains out with his lovely girlfriend. She insisted on putting in an appearance though, and won the discussion.

Winky took her pictures, and the Cortez foursome went to Shawnee in search of Claudia, who again had not told them who her date was, only that she had one. They arrived there to find Claudia waiting for them with Jeff Weaver, a Junior on the Quodpot team that had lost so easily to Jefferson back in October. Warrick and Harry, not knowing Weaver that well, didn’t give any business like they did Ray Elwood, but were friendly enough not to earn them any glares. Jefferson was next, as Drew was again going with Kristy Penman, his date from the Christmas Dance. They were not a couple, but were more like convenient dates to these kinds of things, with a few benefits thrown in, or so Drew had implied to the other guys. Jonas had decided to give Jane Aubrey another chance, and she did seem more chatty than she had before. More pictures were taken by Winky, who was the official photographer of the event, and the gang and dates were off.

The Valentine's Day Dance was not as well attended as the Christmas Dance had been, the younger boys perhaps thinking that this one 'meant' more romantically, one never knows. The dance floor was less crowded, and Harry had taken a moment at the beginning to assure Murray that the Marauders, not that she knew that name, were taking the night off. Fun was had by all, and things were very romantic for our four couples.....and even Claudia and Jeff Weaver were dancing pretty closely, the stone heart might be a little frail after all. Sophie and Harry stuck it out for a couple of hours before leaving. During their last dance:

"This is our last dance for awhile, in public anyway."

"You're a lot better at it than you used to be, all you needed was some practice."

"I just needed a terrific partner that's all."

"Poor Parvati, she missed out."

"Seamus gives her what she wants I'm sure." Sophie giggled.

"Can he dance though?"

"I have no idea, Seamus' dancing ability is not something I've given a lot of thought to."

"That's good to hear. Are we ready to skate out of this party?"

"I thought you'd never ask darling." They said goodbye to their friends, and repaired to the trunk, where they did not make love for the first time. They had talked about this beforehand, and decided that they were not cliché enough to make their first time on Valentine's Day. Sophie's birthday was the final day in March, and it was looking like rounding third and going for home was going to happen on that day. They still had a lot of frolicking fun, and both were more than a little tired by the end.

During halftime, they checked the Map for the others, with only information in mind, not pranking. Sure enough, Jonas and Jane were in his room, Drew and Kristy had somehow gained access to one of the spare rooms in Jefferson and were doing who knows what. Claudia and Jeff were still together, though in full view in the Shawnee Lounge, and Reiko and Warrick were in the basement. All of the couples would separate eventually and return to their own beds. This would prove fortunate in a few hours times, as events overtook them.

Saturday, February 15, 1997

Great Lakes Outer Perimeter, 415 meters from the building

3:50 am EDT

The three vans stopped right at the fluorescent marker sprayed on the roadside. Twenty men piled out, joining the five who had walked there from their own arrival point. They unloaded their gear and met for final instructions. Their leader for this operation was Michael Sheen, who was one of the pack Chieftains in the overall hierarchy of the Lycans. This was one of eight groups nationwide that were gathering around targets at this time: at every school, three Alleys, and the Government Headquarters in Boston.

“Remember what we have trained for men, keep your minds sharp and your focus clear. Missile team, stay within your set parameters, and meet at the school only after all of your ordnance has been exhausted. Attack team, stay out of the missiles’ firing solutions and keep within those lines. Keep your targets in mind, any adults, kill them immediately. Any child, render them unconscious and take them hostage. Destroy everything you can, this will send them a message that perhaps neutrality is in their best interests after all. Now Tony and I will get you set up, that is no farm that you are looking at.”

Michael Sheen and Tony Almeida were American equivalents of Edward Grant in Britain, Lyan Wizards who were totally on the Lyan side of their war. Each of the eight groups had men like these in them, to spot targets that only they could amongst the Lyan forces. Sheen and Almeida were both graduates of Great Lakes, and had

been drilling their team on the sightlines for over a month now, since this operation had been authorized. They spread out the missile team, ten strong, all along the perimeter, placing them just so. Watches had been synchronized for this one moment, when all of the kids and faculty, and others, would be asleep.

When the clock ticked down, Sheen let out a whistle, that meant 10 seconds left. All ten Lycans made the final count in their heads, and then pressed their buttons at targets that they were not able to see.

Ten Stinger Heat Seeking Missiles shot straight toward the large heat source known as The Great Lakes Magical Institute.

End Chapter

Author's Note: You know what's coming in this chapter, and I'm going to try to make what's happening as clear as possible. There will be multiple locations for the battles, as I hinted in the cliffhanger in Chapter Seventeen, so expect a lot of jump cutting and flashbacking so as to keep things organized. One thing: this is not the last chapter in the story, so while the style may have some similarities with the final battle in Straw, the consequences and overall place in the story will not be similar. One final detail: The two uppermost floors of the Great Lakes building are set up like this: Four corridors of roughly 40-50 feet, set in a square pattern. The two Houses on each floor are on opposite ends of the square from each other. The faculty offices on the third floor are all along one corridor, with offices and living quarters on each side. I've made this fuzzily clear in the action below, but I wanted to lay it out better so you know what you're getting into. Enjoy the show.

Saturday, February 15, 1997

Continued

Great Lakes Outer Perimeter

4:00 am EDT

Michael Sheen watched through his Omnioculars as the ten missiles streaked toward the unsuspecting school, impacting a second later on the north, east, and west portions of the building.

KABOOM!!!!

Times ten.

Only the south wall was spared, it being the part of the school facing the currently empty Creatures paddock and the Quidditch/Quodpot stadium, both of which extended the anti-Lycan wards past the comfort of Sheen and his troops. The front doors were on the west side of the building, though there were now a few more entrances to the building than there were previously.

The Lycans, other than Sheen and Almeida, couldn't see this with the naked eye of course, not from the distance that they were firing from, but that would soon change. The missile team quickly reloaded their launchers and let loose a second salvo, directly at the same places as before, and a close observer would notice that the Muggle Repelling Charms were rippling. Sheen, using Omnioculars, confirmed the damage and without taking his eyes off the prize, shouted orders to his assault force.

“CHARGE!”

The 14 man assault force, led by the 44 year old Tony Almeida, headed straight for the very middle of the blast openings, Almeida using his wand and Abrumpere to expand that opening. None of the Lycans had changed as of yet, which was the key here, as they exposed two very wide holes in the Great Lakes defenses, which had never been put to a real test anyway. This was the first time Great Lakes, or any other Wizard school in America had ever been attacked in any way. In fact the last recorded full fledged assault on a Wizard school was at Beauxbaton during the French Revolution, where no one was safe anywhere, magical or muggle. During previous iterations of the Lycan/Kindred/Wizard conflicts, children had always been considered off limits. The Kindred had no children, and the Lycans very few, due to the nature of their 'change', but they had always rigidly respected this. Until now.

There were, at present, 21 anti-Lycan wards placed along the perimeter and inside the building, with varying degrees of length, width, and power. The ones on the perimeter were the more sensitive, and were based solely on detection, the ones inside based on prevention. The detection based wards could identify a Lycan in any form, but the prevention wards only impacted Lycans who had made the change, and even then, those prevention wards did not extend above the first floor, the school elders not thinking that the Lycans could get past the ones on that level.

These Lycans had not made the change.

They were sprinting the quarter-mile toward Great Lakes while in their human form, with M-16 assault rifles at the ready, and a dozen clips

of ammunition covering each of their torsos, and some of them carried other, heavier, weapons as well. The third and fourth salvos of Stingers streaked past them and hit areas of the wall a few feet to the left of their previous hits, widening the gaps, but keeping Almeida and his people out of the line of fire. They reached their entry point just over 90 seconds after the initial launch of the missiles.

The other wide hole, is that the defenses never anticipated a Wizard doing the attacking.

Almeida blew the front doors off with a few well placed Explosion Hexes, and the assault force entered the building. The Muggle Repelling Charms, weakening as they were, were now rendered moot as the Lycans got inside, much as they had been for Kindred Clan Leaders Mark Frankel and Channon Roe back in September. There were three stairwells leading to the upper floors, and the Lycans split into three teams, one for each of the three uppermost floors. Almeida led his team to the fifth floor, which housed Shawnee and Jefferson, though not before loosing a few Abrumpere spells at the Dining Hall, just for the hell of it Brian Herbert led his unit up the fourth floor, home to Cortez and Proctor. Kevin Anderson was the leader of the last group, and they had the smaller, but more dangerous, job of taking on the faculty members who lived on campus on the third floor. Michael Sheen saw this from his vantage point, and ordered two of the missile team to drop their launchers and take up their secondary weapons:

Mortars, aimed right for the rooftops.

Flashback two minutes:

Harry, and a few hundred other students and faculty, were awoken by the multiple explosions that rocked the building hard. Harry was the lightest sleeper of his room and jerked out of a sound sleep.

“What the hell was that?!” The second salvo hit and Harry, though not an expert, became convinced that an earthquake had just hit. They didn’t have those in Michigan did they? Then he heard the voice booming throughout the school, a sort of magical computer voice that

he had never heard before, one that was extremely loud, but not shouting.

“Lycan Ward 4 has been breached.”

“Lycan Ward 15 has been breached.”

The voice, a female one that did not resemble Murray’s, kept repeating the names of Lycan wards being breached, as Warrick, Rick, and Terry all popped out of bed, along with Nicole and Laurie, their new girlfriends of the last month. Harry popped open the doorway as students were streaming into the hallway, most of them seeming to think that this was some kind of drill. Within seconds, Murray’s voice was heard, via Magis Sonorus:

“Attention all students and faculty, Lycans have entered the building, stay in your Lounges and do not leave for any reason! I repeat, Lycans have entered the building, do not leave your Lounges! You are authorized to use whatever force necessary to defend yourselves, up to and including Avada Kedavra.” The voice was relatively calm, but with a tinge of something else mixed in with it. She did not say this was a drill, and that was all Harry needed to hear, or not hear as the case may be. He acted quickly, opened his trunk and reached out both hands:

“Accio Wand! Accio Vest!”

This summoned Voldemort’s wand, and his new dragon hide vest. His regular wand was already nearby, as he kept it under his pillow, fortunately his pajamas had pockets. He put the vest on, the others weren’t looking, and thus did not realize what he was doing until it was too late. Warrick noticed first.

“Oh no dude, you are so not going out there, Murray told us to stay put.” Harry stared hard at his roommate, who in spite of his words, moved from the doorway to let Harry pass, not wanting the battle to kick off right then and there. Rick and Terry had never seen that look on Harry’s face before, and both of them flinched noticeably.

“Yes she did, and you should follow those orders.” He then left the room, bare feet and all, and raced into the Lounge, which was rapidly filling up with curious students, most of whom were still totally convinced that this was a drill, despite Murray not mentioning that detail. The drill theory was losing credibility with every explosion heard, and now they were coming on the roof as well, and though these kids were one floor down from it, they could feel the vibrations. Sophie and Reiko came running out, looking for their boyfriends, only to be brought up short by the sight of Harry with his vest on and a wand in each hand.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going Mister!?” Harry, not really in the mood for this at 4:00 in the morning with explosions doing the waking, shot back immediately as he walked to the door.

“Only four people in this school have combat experience, and I’m one of them.” Murray and Defense teachers Tom Ripley and Dick Greenleaf being the others. All three of his friends ran over to the door, and before they could say anything, Harry spoke so that only they could hear him.

“If they breach the doors, get into the trunk and floo to the shop and wait for Dobby to come get you, the twins will make sure nothing happens to you. Herd as many people into our room as you can, the Pink should protect them somewhat.” He had never imagined needing the Pink to combat Lycans, but there you go.

“Harry, you can’t go out there, the Aurors will be here soon.” Harry looked at his roommate like he was a little slow.

“Oh I’m sure that this is the only place they’re attacking Warrick.” This conversation had drawn some interest, and Harry quickly put a wand to his throat.

“Everyone listen up! All of you below the level of Junior get back to your rooms now and close your doors, wands at the ready! Anyone but Murray and Heyman comes through those doors, kill them!” Murray and Heyman being the only ones who could open every door

in the school without having to resort to gunfire. Harry continued, to the rapt attention of everyone in Cortez House.

“Juniors and Seniors, half of you are to patrol the dorm room hallways, the other half to remain in here in case the doors are breached! You heard Murray, you may use Avada Kedavra against any Lycan that comes in here. No one is to leave this room, am I understood?!” Harry didn’t think it was a bad plan, considering that he had made it up as he went along. The faint sound of gunfire could now be heard outside the Lounge doors, as the younger kids all ran back to their rooms, the two eldest years quietly debating on who was to stay in the Lounge and who was to go, not one of them questioning Harry’s orders, all of them assuming that he knew what he was doing. Harry was about to open the door, when Sophie grabbed his arm.

“Harry, please don’t go, we need you in here.” Yes they ‘might’ need him, Harry thought, but the faculty outside definitely needed his help. He had a brief flash of wonderment that he always seemed to find himself in situations like these. Trouble certainly knew just where was living didn’t it?

“Winky!” Winky, who knew exactly what was going on, popped in.

“Winky, don’t leave Sophie’s side until this is all over. If she tries to leave here before then, restrain her.” Harry opened the door, and everyone could see smoke wafting through the hallway, with the gunfire sounds becoming louder and louder. He looked back at his friends, and saw Clancy of all people in the background, wand in hand and worried look on his face, but he was not running anywhere and looked resolute enough. Harry gave a final glance at his girlfriend.

“I love you Sophie, see you soon.” Harry turned toward a sound in the hallway and pointed one wand at the door, the other at an unseen target. To the door:

“Signum!”

To the Lycan:

“Tergum Fundo!”

Just as the offensive spell left his hand, a fusillade of M-16 rounds hit Harry full in the chest as the door slammed shut, to the soundtrack of Sophie’s screams.

Flashback to the beginning of the attack:

Midwest Auror Headquarters, Milwaukee

The alarms were clanging all over the building, which was the Headquarters for all of the Wizard Government in the Midwest. There was a skeleton crew of two Aurors at the this time of night, comprised of one fresh-faced Academy graduate, and one old time Auror looking to serve out the string. Fortunately, they lived in an age of floo travel, and within four minutes, all of the very sleepy Aurors in the Midwest Command had assembled. The older Auror, Isaac Jaffee, gave them a quick brief while they put their gear on, time being of the essence.

“Less than five minutes ago, the anti-Lycan alarms went off in both Flackter Alley and Great Lakes, there were multiple disturbances and they haven’t stopped ringing since.” Mitchell Baylor, who was only an hour away from getting up anyway, quickly separated his Pods, speaking in a calm, but hurried voice.

“Pods 1-5, go right to Flackter Alley, use all force necessary to kill or capture. Pods 8-15, head for Great Lakes immediately. The rest of you, you’re the reserve, and to be here in case they strike a third position. Go now.”

Fifteen Aurors Apparated into Flackter Alley, and immediately joined the merchants doing battle with the Lycans, who were primarily using machine guns, set in a kind of Western Circle, to cover all the fields of fire. The Lycans weren’t trying to capture anyone in this, or the other two Alley battles, they were only bent on killing and destruction.....and tying down as many Aurors as possible of course, to distract them from the school assaults. The Aurors, led by Brian McCann, of the Goyle Sr. arrest, took to the rooftops in order to get defilades and good firing positions. The Lycans down below seemed

content to keep the Aurors busy, and to cause intermittent damage as much as they could. At the bank, the goblins had barricaded themselves inside and would not come out for anything, despite McCann's Sonorus entreaties. Similar strategies were employed at Corrinus Alley and Chrokar Alley, the Lycans were trying to pin down as many Aurors as possible, while hopefully killing a Wizard or 20. Destruction was also the order of the day, as the Lycan leadership wanted to raise the financial cost of the war for the Wizards, and give them some pause.

Forty Aurors, plus Baylor himself, took the portkey and floo rides to Great Lakes, the majority of them arriving on the outer edge of the campus, to be met by Sheen and five of his missile men, using M-30's and a lot of ammunition at the ready. They were quickly pinned down, as Sheen had put up a series of barriers and shields, just in case. Baylor sent a third of his men around to flank Sheen, only to have them met by mortar and machine gun fire from a camouflaged position that they had not seen. The ten Aurors who took the floo to Murray's office, met with a different set of challenges.

Meanwhile, at The Salem Witches Institute in Massachusetts:

Lycan soldiers had used a slightly different strategy and had not made a full scale invasion of the school, content to lob rockets and mortars at the school, destroying it piece by piece until the Aurors came, not getting within reach of the wards. Salem Headmaster Beau Shupe, a former Auror Pod leader, quickly galvanized his teachers and they started taking long range potshots at their attackers, safe in the knowledge that their students were not in immediate jeopardy. They were having little luck, until about 20 Aurors came in behind the Lycans, and the battle took a turn. Shupe and his Defense and Charms teachers slowly eased forward, throwing up metal shields that just barely deflected the machine gun bullets streaming toward them, while the Aurors quickly attempted to envelop them in a pincer maneuver. This seemed to be working, until the Lycan attackers disappeared into thin air.....and reappeared on the other side of the school, their own Wizards having used portkeys to good effect.

At The Pathfinder School in California:

This was the hardest target for the Lycans to assault, since the school was literally built into the mountains, the campus basically being a multi-million dollar treehouse. The group rappelled up the north side of mountain, and used their Stingers from below, attempting to collapse the mountain underneath the school, and bring it all down like Humpty Dumpty. Like with the other three school assaults, the Pathfinder Lycan team was led by two Lycan Wizards who were graduates of the school and knew the surroundings, and while this would prove to have some benefit, the attack would ultimately prove fruitless. The Pathfinder defenders had one huge advantage: Because of the nature of the school's location, there were floo furnaces in every Lounge and a few dotted all over the building besides, since that was the only sane way to reach the 'campus'. Even the Quidditch stadium, located 25 miles away, had to be reached via floo and portkey. The teachers immediately ordered the students to be evacuated, while half the faculty poured Incendio fire down on the relatively defenseless Lycans, melting over half of them in the first 10 minutes of the defense. The students were flooed to the Pacific Auror Headquarters, which like it's Wisconsin counterpart, only had a thin reserve of Aurors left there, the rest being involved in the pitched battle that was Corrinus Alley just a hundred meters away.

At Tecumseh in Oklahoma:

Karl Aylesworth was the teacher on duty, one always was patrolling the halls, just in case, and thus was the first to act as the alarms went haywire. Tecumseh did not have a single neighbor within five miles, and there could be no doubt of what was happening, no one stumbled upon Tecumseh by mistake. Karl heard the first explosions, and instinctively ran toward them. He surprised the first echelon of the Lycans and dropped one with a well placed Reducto to the head. That surprised the trailers enough so that their first M-16 shots went a little wild, and Karl was able to Apparate back to his office and his no longer sleeping wife, teachers being able to Apparate at all American Wizard Schools, though that privilege was about to end, as anti-Apparition wards slammed into place exactly one minute after the Lycan wards were violated. The Headmaster, Robert Clary, was not skilled in any way in Defense, so he left the quick planning of the defense to Defense teachers Henry Hill and James Burke. Burke and Hill immediately dispatched faculty members to the various Houses,

to organize the students and help protect them. They, along with the Aylesworths, would attempt to harass and delay the Lycans until the Aurors arrived.

Back to Great Lakes, and fourth floor Cortez:

Harry's spell sealed the door shut as Sophie screamed out:

“NOOO!!!”

She immediately tried to open it, only to find that Harry's Sealing Spell had all but super-glued the door closed, and she used all her weight to try to turn the knob, but it wouldn't budge. She took out her wand and took aim at the door, only to have Reiko and Warrick grab both arms and pull her back. They tried to calm her down as she struggled to break free, all of them aware that little Winky had no intention of disobeying Harry's orders, so any struggle by Sophie was rather pointless.

“Sophie, don't. He has that vest on and I'll bet my life that it can stop bullets.” He said this with a confidence that he didn't really feel.

“He's right Sophie, Harry needs to focus on the Lycans right now, he can't be worrying about whether you're taking any fire or not.” That logic was lost on Sophie as she seemed to be about to raise her wand at her best friends. Ed Lattimore had been listening to them and came up to lead Sophie away from the door, gently.

“C'mon Sophie, we need to get things set up in here, just in case.”

“We can't leave him out there!”

“He knows what he's doing Sophie, the guy has been fighting off people trying to kill him for over six years, he can do this.” Harry and Lattimore had swapped a few stories over the months, both of them recognizing that cooperation would be to their mutual benefit. The older boy, who was just a hair under Warrick's size, liked Harry, but on the whole was somewhat afraid of him, feeling that Harry's Dursley/Hogwarts experiences had made him very hard and

somewhat unforgiving. It was well known among the older Cortez students that Harry was not to be screwed with under most any circumstance, Joe Clancy being a reminder of why, though no one else as yet had challenged him.

Sophie reluctantly agreed, before having a sudden inspiration:

“Winky, if I promise not to go near that door, will you please go get an Extendable Ear for me? I swear I won’t try to leave the Lounge.” Winky didn’t like this, but it seemed to be a reasonable request on the surface. She popped to the trunk and back within five seconds, and noted with relief that Sophie did not appear to have moved an inch. Sophie took the Ear and moved toward the wall between the doors and the girls’ bathroom. She used a little known drilling spell that Harry had taught her, with an eye toward this type of thing, and bored a small hole in the wall, just enough for an Extendable Ear to get through. What she heard:

Harry’s offensive spell had been a borderline Dark spell that melted the skin of the target. It glanced off the right shin of the Lycan attacker and started him screaming as it removed a piece of his pants and the skin of that shin at the same time. Lycans are tough by design, but the surprise and the damage combined to drop him to the ground.

Harry himself had been slammed back about a body length by the seven bullets that slammed into his chest, but the bullets themselves bounced off harmlessly, the distance of 30 feet being too great to penetrate the vest. He had seen them coming almost slow motion, as time almost seemed to stop. He felt the impact they made on him, and felt almost amazed that they weren’t going through the vest. All that happened in a split second, before he snapped back into play and addressed the changed situation. He knew immediately that he had some cracked ribs, but no holes in him that weren’t there already. He quickly rolled to his right and let loose an Incendio spell right at the Lycan’s feet, and it made contact with the damaged portion of the man’s leg, dropping him like a rock as he had just gotten back to his feet again, being set on fire will do that to a person. Harry scrambled to his feet, and charged the Lycan, firing stunners as fast as he could

with both wands, connecting multiple times, the Lycan being too busy focusing on putting the fire on his clothes out.

Harry wound up doing that for him, and putting some magical ropes around him as tightly as he could before he woke him up. Sophie had just put the Ear through the hole in the wall when she heard Harry start questioning his adversary, and while she was relieved beyond measure that Harry was all right, what she heard put a chill into her, the Ear being just sensitive enough to pick it up:

“How many of you are there?” The Lycan sneered through the pain.

“Go to hell Wizard.” Harry pointed his own wand at the Lycan’s injured leg and let loose, keeping the other at his foe’s left temple:

“REPULSAR!”

The Lycan screamed again as the punch like spell slammed into his charred leg, Harry had put as much power as he could into it. He was frantically looking around and trying to hear if anybody else was coming. Nobody seemed to be, and that worried him more than anything.

“I repeat, how many of you are there?! I can do this all day buddy.” This Lycan, a barely out of his teens youngster named Jeff Krupp, had a little bravado left, enough for one last jab.

“We’re going to slaughter all of you little Wizards, you’ll be on your knees begging us to turn you before the hour is up.” A grim smile flashed over Harry’s face, as he mentally superimposed Snape’s face over this one’s.

“Way wrong answer mate.” Harry hit him with a series of Pulse spells that knocked him unconscious, though without revealing any information. Harry wasn’t used to this questioning business yet, though he would learn soon enough. Sophie was giving a play by play of this to Reiko and Warrick, as Harry called out:

“Dobby!” Dobby came in, very pale.

“Yes Harry?”

“Get me a bag full of swamps and some spell grenades, then go to Murray and find out what the bloody hell is going on.” Dobby nodded and came back a few seconds later with Harry’s requested supplies, then popped off to see what Murray was doing. Harry deployed a swamp right in front of the Cortez door, and slowly headed toward the hallway corner, wincing as he got used to his damaged ribs.

However, before Harry had summoned his major-domo, Dobby had taken one little detour: To WWW. He popped right in the middle of the twins’ inventing time, which was always mid-morning when they were both awake and at their most energetic. He quickly explained the situation to the startled Fred and George, who wasted little time in hopping in the trunk and flooing overseas, right as Dobby got his summons from Harry. As they scrambled up the ladder, Fred looked at his twin.

“Boy that portkey ride was wild, right George?”

“Right Fred, we’ll have headaches the rest of the day.” The understanding came to, they exited the trunk to an empty room. This had been planned however, just in case, as Harry had obtained, at considerable cost, a pair of portkeys that would take the twins from London to Michigan, so that they could be truthful in theory if the twins needed to be here quickly for an emergency. Add to that a counter-ward that Harry had found in his library, and a portkey could work, in a very limited section of the room. Fred and George hesitantly approached the door, though they were not in danger while leaving the room however. Harry had, on the sly, inoculated them to the Pink, for future reference and just in case, as it worked both ways, entering and leaving. They had never been in this part of Cortez before, there had been only one brief visit in October to see Harry’s room, but they immediately saw one of the patrolling students and asked her.

“Which way is the Lounge?” The student, Junior Marie Ford, noticing the red hair and the English accents, looked dumbfounded at

them, seemingly trying to decide if they were Lycans, or some sort of hallucination. Neither twin had time for this crap, and George addressed her harshly.

“Out with it girl! Do we look like bloody werewolves?! Where is the Lounge?!” She pointed to the left, which is where they had thought it might be anyway, given the noise. They strode as quickly as they could without jogging until they reached the Lounge, which had about 18 students in it, including Warrick, Reiko, and Sophie, who had just started listening at the wall. Most of the students were arranging barricades and otherwise making plans for when the Lycans got there, as they assumed they would. The twins saw their friends and stalked over to them, not caring about the sudden stops in conversation as everyone wondered at who they were and how they had gotten in. Their accents dispelled most of the questions for the moment, as the twins did not see their partner.

“Where is he!?” The trio all gave a start at seeing the twins, but none had to ask how they got there or who had told them.....at least none were dumb enough to do so out loud. Warrick pointed to the hallway.

“He’s out there, he left about a minute ago.” Shit, they both thought, they had been afraid of this, as Warrick didn’t have the heart to tell them that Harry had probably taken half a clip of ammo right in the chest.

“Did he at least have the vest on and his spare wand with him?”

“Yes to both.” Well at least he had that going for him, they had field tested the vest as well, and were plotting on how to con Charlie into coming up with four pieces of dragon hide just for them, now that Dobby had gotten the hang of sewing the stuff.

“Thank Merlin for small favors. Now out of the way, our baby brother needs us.” The three of them parted, though a few of the bolder students came forward as if to join them, and neither twin wanted any part of that, especially Warrick or any other gang member. George addressed them briefly.

“Don’t even think about it children. Tell you what, anyone in this room that has actually killed someone before, can come with us. No? Just sit tight then.” Fred grabbed the door and found that Harry had sealed it.

“I knew we shouldn’t have taught him how to do that.” He put the counter to it while George had a word with Reiko.

“Pink every door in there, it’ll slow them down enough if they get past us. Go now.” Reiko grabbed Sophie and they sprinted back to the dorm rooms, Winky hurrying behind, as Fred got the Lounge doors open. They found a swamp right in front of it, and both of them sighed, though not unhappily as it proved that Harry was still alive somewhere. They saw a body lying on the ground in the distance, but couldn’t tell if it was Harry or a Lycan, or somebody else.

“Well at least he’s thinking. Fred, levitate me to the other side, I’ll get you over then after you seal the door back up.” His brother used Moblicorpus to get him over the swamp, and George did the same. They approached the body as it seemed to be waking up, Harry was about 20 feet ahead at the corner, peering around it, the Lounge being exactly halfway down the corridor from each corner. Suddenly the Lycan made the change, which burst the magical ropes, and he leaped up and charged Harry. Our man, who had just spied the twins out of the corner of his eye, had the same idea as his surrogate brothers and whipped up both wands, as they did the same.

“Abrumpere!” “Abrumpere!” “Abrumpere!” “Abrumpere!”

It probably took all four of them to bring Krupp down, and it helped greatly that all four shots hit him in the torso, destroying his spine and most of his ribs. Add that to Harry’s earlier spell work and interrogation techniques, and Krupp was now a former living person. Harry grinned at the twins as they came up to him, poking the body with his foot, just in case.

“What took you guys so long?” Humorous to the last.

“Funny little bugger aren’t you? Are you all right?” The shell casings had been absorbed by the swamp, so they couldn’t have known.

“Well I got shot by a muggle assault rifle, but the vest handled itself just fine. Just a couple of cracked ribs, the usual.” This was one time that the twins reacted differently: Fred was rendered speechless at the idea of his little brother taking seven in the chest, while George just saw that Harry was undamaged and moved on.

“Not much more than a stubbed toe given your history. What did you do to his leg?”

“Just some homemade plastic surgery.”

“How many more are there?”

“Merlin only knows. I sent Dobby to find out from Murray, though he made a detour first I take it.” It had actually been the other way around, but the twins didn’t know this. They heard more gunfire from around the corner, which seemed to be coming from the direction of the Proctor Lounge door, though in fact it was coming from one floor down.

Meanwhile, on the third floor:

Murray, alone in her room with Doctor Neil being on hospital duty until noon, had sprung out of bed upon hearing the first explosion. Great Lakes was not as isolated as Tecumseh was, but there was nothing out there that should have caused that kind of noise save a plane crash. As soon as the first Lycan alarm went off, she gave the Magis Sonorus message as described earlier, using a reasonably well rehearsed plan that had been updated in recent weeks. She did it not knowing if the Lycans had actually gotten inside, but felt that every second the students could use to hide would be to their benefit. Great Lakes had long resisted floor fireplaces in the Lounges, feeling that the kids needed a clean break from their home lives, and not wanting to encourage parents to check up on their offspring five times a day, as often happened with muggle boarding schools.....but Joanne

Murray was having huge split second thoughts about that policy right about now.

She quickly got dressed and grabbed her wand as she poked her head outside her office door....and almost lost her head, literally, to gunfire from down the hall, as the Lycans had established a machine gun post. She snapped back in, but barely batted an eye as Heyman flooded into her office, quickly warding the door as much as she could as Heyman collected himself. Indeed the Deputy looked very flustered, not having ever thought this would come to pass.

“What do we do Joanne? Are you sure this isn’t some sort of drill by the Aurors?” She knew this was coming, but it still irritated her.

“Only Lycans can set off those wards David, and they would have at least warned me in advance if it was a drill. Get on the floo and call to the faculty, every one of them, we need them here now. Go back to your office though, any Aurors coming will need my floo.” A shade less than half of the faculty lived on campus, and neither of the Defense teachers. As Heyman left he had a question.

“Any Aurors that come? You think they’re attacking elsewhere?”

“It would stand to reason, now go.” Heyman disappeared, just in time as Lyman and Maloney came through one by one.

“What’s going on? What the hell are those explosions for? Are those idiot Aurors running a drill without telling us?”

“The Lycans are here Josh, they just shot at me.” You could hear a pin drop now, as Dobby now popped in, startling more than a couple of them.

“Professor Murray ma’am, Harry sent me to ask you what’s going on.” Murray was about to explode, her ‘unique’ relationship with Harry notwithstanding, she didn’t need to update him personally.....uh oh. Lyman got there first though:

“He left the Lounge, didn’t he?”

“He is in the fourth floor hall, one werewolf has been taken down. I took the liberty of sending for the twins ma’am, Harry fights much better with them at his side.” Murray took this news much better than she was under any obligation to, as teachers started coming through the floor.

“I don’t want to know how they got around the anti-portkey wards, do I?” Dobby didn’t like the idea of lying to this woman, but after years with the Malfoys, he was a very accomplished actor.

“Harry voided them only for use in emergencies, and this is an emergency ma’am.” Which was sort of true, in a sense.

“All right I suppose, tell the three of them to wait for the Aurors if possible, but not to take too many chances if they go on the offensive.” Dobby nodded at her, and popped away.

“Joanne, he’s an asset, 16 year old kid or not.” She turned to the assembled faculty, conceding the point.

“I know Josh. All right listen up! I want all of you back in your offices and to open your doors one by one. They have a machine gun post set up at the junction, but they cannot have unlimited bullets, so let’s waste as many of them as we can. Do not step outside under any circumstances! We will wait to see how much Auror support we will receive.” This was the conservative approach, and did not go over well with some of the teachers, all of whom had assembled in the tightly packed office.

“What about the kids? They’re going to need our help any second now.” Murray was thinking more like an Auror than an educator.

“We can’t help them if we’re dead before we leave the floor, we have to know what’s out there. There is only one way into the Lounges, and the upperclassmen will be ready for them.” Said with a sense of hope that was not universally shared within the room. Tom Ripley didn’t waste any time talking or complaining, he strode to the door and popped it open.

A barrage of bullets greeted him, and he jerked back his arm, but let loose a few minor jinxes down to the right, where the fire had come from. That stopped the firing for a moment, and Ripley took the opportunity to peer down the hall. He ducked back inside, closing the door. None of the teachers had left yet, wanting to see what he was doing. He calmly told them.

“There are two of them manning the machine gun, they have assault rifles over their backs as well. I couldn’t tell how much spare ammunition they had or if they were toting any grenades.....speaking of grenades Josh, of your Potter pranks, did you buy any of those spell grenade balls they sell?” The Lyman/Harry friendship had not gone unnoticed, not that Lyman cared, but he knew what Tom intended here.

“I have about four or five left, I’ll go get them.” He left, and Murray told the faculty, save Heyman, Greenleaf, and Ripley to get going to their offices. It took a couple of minutes to get them all out, and by then Lyman was back. Ripley took command, with Murray’s agreement.

“All right, once the door opening gambit is completed, load these things up with Petrificus Totalus, Harry told me that this is about the most advanced spell they can handle. Are these the timer or the impact variety?” He and Harry had had a chat once about the potential defense uses for some of the twins’ creations.

“Impact.”

“All the better.” He opened the door back up and got fewer bullets hitting it than before, as the former Auror heard Murray’s ‘open door’ strategy start to take effect.

Meanwhile, on the Fifth floor:

This assault team was led by Tony Almeida, and was aided by the impact that the mortar rounds were having on the roof. The roof was extra strength, due to the weather demands placed on it most of the

year, but nothing could hold back the explosives for very long. The rounds were quickly dialed in and collapsed major portions of the roof in both Jefferson and Shawnee Lounges, as well as the hallways. In Shawnee Lounge Claudia had begun organizing the students into a sort of defensive layer inside the Lounge, while unknowingly aping Harry in ordering the younger years to their dorm rooms. The older students spent a lot of time dodging falling bits of the ceiling, and it was rapidly getting very cold as more and more of the ceiling was transformed into a sunroof. All the students put Warming Charms on themselves, but all were shivering with the anticipation of what might be coming through the doors at any moment.

In Jefferson, everyone looked to Drew for leadership, even the Seniors. He was calm by nature, and seemed even more cool under pressure as he quietly gave out instructions. He picked out the top Senior in Defense, Hayley Lewis, and the two of them did a quick recon out of the door. The Lycans had not reached the top floor as of yet, and he and Lewis silently padded toward the stairs. They swung the door open and listened.

What they heard was the Almeida team doing something to the walls on the stairwell between the fourth and fifth floors, though Drew and Hayley could not tell what it was. They did see that the adult looking types were no one that they knew, and the two stole back to their Lounge and filled everyone in. Drew personally put the Pink on the door area, and in contrast to the other Houses, he had all the students deploy back to the dorm room hallway, after putting more layers of Pink on the bathrooms, and the entrance to the dorm hallway. They buckled down in said hallway, as Drew looked at Jonas.

“We’re going to be fine, Dad and his guys will be here any minute now.” Jonas brought up the obvious.

“What if they’re hitting other places?”

That brought out a question long debated amongst the Wizards during these kinds of wars: How many Lycans were there in circulation? The Wizards took a census every September, mostly for taxation and Congressional representation purposes, so they had a

very good idea of their numbers. Likewise The Kindred were extraordinarily disciplined when it came to adding new members, most of whom were very willing adults, and had their own population estimate accurate within a dozen or so. By contrast, the Lycans had no idea, as they were not thought to have the control over their members that the other two non-muggle factions did. The Lycans had only come up on the short end of the last few wars because they were not as powerful as the Wizards, or as rich as The Kindred, the vampires living upwards of 200 years unless dying in battle or by subterfuge. Without those advantages for the Wizards and The Kindred, the wars would have gone much differently, the Lycans being better hand to hand fighters than their adversaries.

“There are enough Aurors Jonas, we’ve always handled them before, this should be no different.” This had a somewhat calming effect on Jonas and the others, as everyone with friends in other Houses were worried about what might be happening elsewhere. What if Jefferson was last to be hit?

Fourth Floor:

Harry, Fred, and George inched forward to look around the corner, but saw nothing. There was nothing in this corridor, the Proctor Lounge was on the other side. Fred said what they were all thinking:

“I have a hard time believing that they just sent one guy.” Harry privately suspected that at least one Remus type Lycan was involved in the assault, but he doubted that they were so well informed about Wizard affairs that they knew just where to find him personally.

“Once more into the breach then?”

“You lead on mate, this is your turf.” They walked forward, somewhat slowly, all four wands in front of them.

“So what did you do to that werewolf?”

“I used a Skin Melting Spell that I read about. Seemed to work pretty well, given that I barely got him with it.” George grimaced.

“Remind me not to make an enemy of you anytime soon.”

“I get that a lot.”

“No doubt.....so how do you do the spell? Might come in handy, you know, any second now.”

“Tergum Fundo, but it takes a fair amount of power, so you can’t just throw it off.”

“Duly noted, and that pulse thing you keep bragging about?”

“Repulsar.” George looked a bit abashed.

“Oh right, should have figured that one out.” They were coming up on the next corner, their murmuring having not attracted any undue attention. Harry was nominated to do the next looking, as he was far more familiar with muggle weapons than the twins, both by being muggle raised and by his movie watching experience. What he saw were two Lycans approaching the Proctor door, in something of a hurry, but lugging what looked to be some explosive charges. Harry idly wondered what the hell had taken them so long, the alarms must have gone off almost five minutes ago. He himself had gotten half dressed, argued with Sophie, captured, interrogated, and killed a Lycan, and had a few lines of witty repartee with Fred and George, yet the two groups seemed to have arrived at the same time. He would learn the answer to that soon enough.

The two Lycans were not looking in his direction as they loaded up the door with their explosives, and Harry spotted another two down the hall with a machine gun setup. If Harry had known that there were five attackers, he would have now accounted for them all, but with his current information, there could be 100 more for all he could be sure of. He reported the situation back to the twins, and they all looked at each other as if ‘well what now?’

George was carrying the spell grenade bag, while Fred had the swamp container, Harry not having a free hand since he had both of his wands out. Fred took out a swamp.

“Who’s the most accurate spell caster from a distance here? We can throw one of these near the door and activate it, it should slow them down at least.” Harry thought about it for half a second.

“I’ll do it, I nailed one pretty good during our first mass duel, from further away. I’ll just treat it like a Snitch. Fred, you throw it, George load up a couple of spell grenades and distract those two.”

“What about the two at the other end?” You know, the ones with the machine gun, he didn’t have to say.

“We’ll just hope that they have bad aim. On three.” They got ready, as George put Petrificus Totalus on two spell grenades.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three!”

Fred whipped around the corner and pitched the swamp right at the feet of the two Lycans, who had just finished setting the charges and were preparing to blow the door. They looked over with a start, and desperately tried to get their weapons from over their backs. Harry swung around and fired with both wands.

“Activate!” “Activate!” “Activate!” “Activate!”

Only one of the four shots hit the swamp, but that’s all they needed as the swamp sprung up around the two Lycans.....who were in the way of their colleagues down at the other end, so no immediate fire came the Brits’ way. One of George’s spell grenades found it’s target, and the Lycan, they were all males by the way, was dropped face first into the muck. His colleague, though, was the one holding the

detonator, and he managed to squeeze it before a barrage of Pulse Spells hit him, via Fred and Harry.

KABOOM!!

The Proctor door blasted inward like a cannon shot, catching two of the students full in the body, killing one of them instantly and putting the other in a week-long coma. With one of their comrades down, the machine gun opened fire and the Brits had to duck back behind the corner.

“When they change ammo belts we’ll have a few seconds, swing around and start firing Repulsar, it will barely sap you and it can travel a long way, I’ll aim for the other one by the door.” The twins both nodded, but Harry was not needed for his part of the gambit, as the detonating Lycan had foolishly tried to advance inside the Proctor Lounge only to be met with a hail of Reducto Spells that pretty much turned his torso into powder. The ammo belt was being changed now and the Brits came around just in time to see the untimely demise of another Lycan. Fred and George fired their Pulse spells down the hall, hitting only a couple of times but forcing a delay in rearming. Harry put his wand to his throat and used Sonorus.

“Attention Proctor House, this is Harry Potter, stay in your Lounge! I repeat, do not come out until I give you an all clear!” There was no immediate confirmation from Proctor, but no one disobeyed his ‘directive’.

The twins’ Pulse barrage, given the distance and their unfamiliarity with the casting of it, was only so effective, and the Lycans managed to get a new belt in, and they opened back up, forcing the Brits to retreat again. The Lycan that George had hit with the spell grenade had just died, since he was frozen and could not move, he choked on the muck and died of asphyxiation.

Third Floor:

The Aurors had finally arrived, three Pods worth, as they came through Murray’s floo, Through the relatively thin ceiling above, they

all heard the door explosion, and Harry's directive to Proctor. Murray looked at Ripley, who even in retirement, was looked at by his newly arrived former Auror colleagues as the person in charge.

"Well he seems to be in control up there." Ripley smiled faintly.

"Josh did tell us so. Okay, Josh and Dick, I want you to load up those spell grenades and see if you can ricochet one or more to hit them. Even if you miss it might even give them a moment of pause to see a few racquetballs coming down the hall toward them, I know it would me. The rest of you, after they do that, I want as many wands wrapped around that door as possible to lay down some cover fire, literally, I want you to use Incendio. Joanne, you and I are going to go in the opposite direction and see what obstacles they have in place at the other end. Questions?" There were no questions, and Lyman and Greenleaf loaded up their spell grenades, and on Ripley's signal, threw them down the hall.....unfortunately, neither of them were in danger of being drafted by the muggle Detroit Tigers, and they did not hit living things, though one made contact with an ammunition belt.

The Aurors all reached around and started in with their Incendio part of the play. This had a lot more success, as the Kevin Anderson led machine gun crew was forced to hastily pick up their gun and retreat to the stairwell door. Murray and Ripley stole out of the office and started down the hallway, only to be met by fire from another machine gun that quickly swung around that corner. The two Lycans had been waiting patiently for the Wizards to make that kind of mistake, using regular mirrors to keep tabs on the situation.

Ripley went down immediately with bullets in both legs and his stomach, Murray was grazed on the hip and her right arm, and hit the deck more from instinct than anything else. Two very alert Aurors summoned both of them back to Murray's office, as there were at least three Aurors pouring Incendio down the other way, to keep that machine gun at bay. Once inside, Murray quickly put bandages on her slight wounds, and then took a look at Ripley. He was conscious, but in a bad way with his stomach wound, and Lyman quickly got on the floo and summoned Dr. Carter. Carter had been sent by the

Salem people to keep watch at Great Lakes, since the battle at the other school had not yet reached the students.

Carter came in a flash of floo powder, and took five seconds to examine Ripley. There was no exit wound, so the bullet was still inside his belly. Carter looked at the Defense teacher, whom he barely knew other than to say hello.

“Tom, I’m going to need to get you down to the med station to get the bullets out. It sounds like walking down there is out of the question, from the noise and explosions. Can you handle a floo trip?” That would be very painful with a trio of open wounds, but there really was no other choice. Ripley’s next statement said as much.

“Let’s get it over with.”

Carter and one of the Aurors helped him to the floo, and Ripley got himself down to the med station without passing out. Carter quickly followed and worked on him, with Nurse Meryl Burbank assisting, and got the four bullets out, it turned out that he took two of them in the right leg. The medical attention happened quickly enough that Ripley had not lost very much blood at all, and within a few minutes he was demanding to be allowed back into the fight. Carter and Burbank, shockingly, were opposed to the motion. Ripley threatened the loudest though, and won the point. He floored back to the office to find that that strategic situation had not changed much.

“Did you get any of them?”

“No, they’ve adjusted their fire enough that we can’t get a good shot at them.”

“We really need a floo to the other floors, so we can flank them.” Lyman, listening in, had an idea. Before Murray could stop him, he put his wand to his throat and called out:

“Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Send Dobby down to Professor Murray’s office! Send Dobby down to Professor Murray’s office!” It must have worked, because five seconds later, Dobby popped in. Presumably

the Lycans would not know who Dobby was, though Tony Almeida might guess it because of the name.

“Yes Professor Josh?”

“What’s going on up there?”

“There are three werewolves down, and at least two more with a big gun. Harry and Twin Fred and Twin George are taking long shots at them, but otherwise are still debating on what to do. Right now their main focus is on keeping the werewolves away from Proctor House.” Ripley took over, chiding himself for not thinking of Dobby, or any of the other House Elves for that matter, before. They couldn’t be drafted into the fight itself, but they would make for good messengers and scouts.

“What was that explosion?”

“The Proctor door being blown off sir. I was sent in to check, and there is one student unconscious.....and one student is not alive.” The room, quiet before, was now funereal, as the first confirmed death was acknowledged.

“Tell Harry to get past those two as quickly as possible, we’re pinned down in here. Once he deals with them, come back here and tell us his route. Oh, and if you would please Dobby, check on the fifth floor situation.”

“Yes sir, I will tell them.” He disappeared. One of the Aurors looked at Murray.

“Who are these twins the elf was talking about? Can they fight?”

“George and Fred Weasley, Harry’s friends from Hogwarts. They’re 18 and they most certainly can fight, they were side by side with him at that trial fiasco back in September, as well as the Hogsmeade battle in December, against their own Lycans. Harry got them in here despite our wards, they run that joke shop that’s so popular.” More Aurors were nodding, perhaps Mitchell Baylor, still outside trying to

advance on Michael Sheen, had told them about the joke shop. They kept up their Incendio diversion, growing more and more frustrated at the stalemate, but confident that things could be much worse.

On the fifth floor:

The Lycans had all but abandoned the fifth floor, after booby trapping both the Jefferson and Shawnee doors, content to allow the mortar fire from outside to inflict any casualties, and not wanting to take any of their own from the mortar fire, which was somewhat indiscriminate. There had been no serious injuries so far, as the pieces falling had not been big enough, though some of the larger ones that had fallen caused some bruises and cuts. The Shawnee students were still waiting in their defensive positions for a charge that would never come, though they had heard the scratching on the door when the Lycans were setting the booby traps. The Jefferson students were a little more restless, and Jim Bouton, a Senior and one of Jonas' Quodpot teammates, had a very rash idea that he tried to sell to Drew.

"Drew, there's a big enough hole in the ceiling, some of us could get on our brooms and go outside. There's no way that kind of weapon can target us on our brooms, we can go take it out, and see what's going on outside." They had heard faint sounds of gunfire, but could not tell if it was coming from outside or downstairs.....it was both, but again, it was hard to tell. Drew chewed on it for a second, and looked up. Indeed the hole was big enough, and the Lycans would never think of a diversion from there. It was just rash enough that they probably wouldn't be expecting it.

"Okay, do it. Jim, Art, Ryan, you go, I need Jonas here. Take your wands and see what the situation is." Bouton, Art Hailey, and Ryan Chappelle, the best of the Senior flyers, sprinted to their rooms to retrieve their gear, and their coats. Just after another mortar round hit, Drew had them go up through the hole that had just been increased. They got outside in half a second, and what they saw almost made them fall off their brooms.

Back to the fourth floor, a few minutes earlier:

Dobby came back and gave the Brits their instructions. Harry looked at the twins with a bit of exasperation.

“They don’t want much do they?”

“You have a reputation to uphold I suppose. I guess we need to act fast.”

“We could always backtrack and go down another stairwell.”

“No, that would leave Proctor totally vulnerable, with no door to protect them. We have to do a rush of some kind.”

“Do you still have the Invisibility Cloak?” Harry hadn’t even looked at it in months, and it had totally slipped his mind, he having not really needed here at Great Lakes. Dobby was still there, and Harry had barely opened his mouth when the little guy was there and back with it. Harry gave it to Fred to put on.

“Stay to the right side of the hallway, George and I will walk our spells down the middle and the left if they start firing. If they don’t fire, all the better and you can get down there a lot more quickly and with more stealth. If you get hit, yell out something and we’ll Summon you back. Here, take this.” He took off the vest and gave it to Fred as well. Fred wasn’t too pleased about this, but rationalized that it would be better to have three wands firing down the hall than the two that would be if Harry was under the cloak.

“If it gets too hot for you, just duck into Proctor as quickly as you can, and ask for Ray Elwood, he’s our guy in there for pranks and things.” Fred nodded, and slipped both the vest, which just fit him, and the cloak, which would no longer house any two or three of them as it had used to. He looked down at his feet, and saw a bare shadow in the harsh overhead lights, but knocking out the lights in the corridor would have been too obvious. He inched out into the line of fire, but nothing happened, as the Lycans, unbeknownst to the Brits, had run below half on their ammo and were conserving it until they saw something.

Fred moved as quickly as he dared, but the 50 feet seemed to take forever rather than 40 seconds. All the while he was debating with himself on what to do, hoping that George and Harry would remember where he was, and be ready for when he did something. The closer he got, the slower he walked, trying desperately not to make any noise. He stole a look at the space formerly occupied by the Proctor door, and saw a cluster of kids with shaking wands, trying to be ready just in case, but scared blind all the same. He got to within 10 feet of the gun and the two Lycans and saw that they were totally fixated on the corner of the hallway that Harry and George were hiding at, which also gave them a clear line of sight on the Proctor door, in case the kids were foolhardy enough to try and leave.....the Lycans had heard Harry's instructions just as clearly as the kids had.

Once he got within that 10 feet he stopped, fearful of the shadow revealing him. The Lycans were on the left side of the space, which was not too great for him, given that both twins were right handed. Now he was debating the curse to use. Harry had told him of Murray's 'use whatever force necessary' statement, but he was unclear about whether or not it applied to he and his brother, the only two Wizards who were in the fight voluntarily. Harry had gotten him more attached to the Explosion Hex, Abrumpere, which was nothing more than a souped up version of Reducto, but effective without being Dark. He decided to use that, and counted to five in his mind, aiming at the one on the right, hoping that Harry and George would take the hint..

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

He threw the cloak off violently with his left arm, his right arm already raised. As soon as the cloak cleared:

“ABRUMPERE!” Fred, despite almost two years of NEWT Charms, could not do Silent Magic very well at all.

The Hex was aimed right at the face of the Lycan holding the spare ammunition, and it connected perfectly, killing him instantly.

Harry and George had indeed taken the hint, and had opened fire from the distance, with Repulsar. Given that they were prepared and not dodging fire, they hit their target with multiple hexes and knocked him back, which gave Fred just enough time to redirect his wand and hit him with another Abrumpere, to the chest. It didn't kill the Lycan, but hurt him pretty badly to the point of unconsciousness. He eyed the M-30 with a lot of distaste as he looked around that corner for more Lycans. He didn't find any, and waved the others over, they could see even from 50 feet away that he didn't want to make a lot of noise. George ran up to him while Harry took a detour into Proctor. He had known, via Dobby, of the fatality, but seeing the body rocked him a little, it was a Junior named Ross Karver. Harry had Transfiguration and Muggle Studies with him, though they had never talked. Injured was Transition Jeannie Baum, though she would eventually live.

“Everyone okay in here? We seem to have cleared the floor.” Ray was up front and answered him.

“We're still here, thanks to you and your guys. What do we do now?”

“Well the twins and I are going to try and help the faculty. The rest of you besides Ray are going to do precisely nothing, at least no more than you have. I don't want anyone to leave until the building is safe. Ray, I want you to go around to Cortez for a second and tell them that the floor is clear. Sophie bored a hole in the wall so she could listen, so you don't have to knock on the door. Just get to the edge of the swamp and tell them they can relax about an ounce, but they're not to come out either.....if they can, the twins sealed the door back up after they left.”

“And after I get back?”

“Barricade with every couch and piece of furniture you can in front of that opening. Anyone tries to come in, mass your fire at them, you should have enough advance warning to do some serious damage. Otherwise do NOT leave this Lounge, we can't cover every entrance ourselves, and some might slip past us. Now I gotta go, good luck.” He called for Dobby and had the little guy go fill in the teachers and Aurors. He then handed Ray a swamp and quickly jogged up to the twins, while Ray did his business with Cortez. The twins were at the stairwell and looked at him darkly, Fred addressing him.

“We may have a problem Harry.”

“What the hell else can go wrong?”

“That stairwell is booby trapped to high heaven.”

Meanwhile, in the air above Great Lakes:

Jim Bouton, Art Hailey, and Ryan Chappelle sped out of the building as quickly as they could without hitting anything, and saw four ground-based groups firing at each other. Even from a height of a couple hundred feet like they were flying at, they could tell the difference between the flashing lights that were bullets and the lights that were magical in nature. That was all they could see though, as Sheen had long since put Disillusionment Charms on all of his troops. That meant that the Aurors could only focus on the muzzle blasts from the machine guns to set their targets. So they could only get a good shot when they were already being fired upon. Not a good thing really.

The mortars, still just two of them fifteen feet apart, had not moved, and they watched as more rounds came crashing down on the top of the building, one just missing Harry's plants, though they of course didn't know anything about that. They pinpointed the location, and after a group huddle, decided on a power dive to take them out. Bouton and Hailey would go down first, with Chappelle in reserve, using Reducto as their main weapon. They flew up another hundred

feet, and on a count of ten, Bouton and Hailey went straight down at the enemy, in a kind of Wronski Feint maneuver, though they didn't call it that, not needing it in Quodpot. The two Seniors, the best flyers in the Senior class in any House, screamed down, and began walking their fire into the mortars at about 50 feet. It was a textbook dive bomber assault, and one that would become a popular chapter in the next update of the Auror Training Manuals for both America and Great Britain and friends.

“REDUCTO!” “REDUCTO!”

They got off about five shots each before they had to pull out of the dive, and then Chappelle had his turn.....though it was not as successful, as he did not pull out in time and crashed into the left side mortar and it's user, which had only been dealt glancing blows by Hailey's run. Both of them, Chappelle and the Lycan, were killed by the harshness of the impact, and the mortar was damaged enough to be taken out of action. The other mortar had not been hit by Bouton's run, but he had managed to kill the Lycan manning it, seriously damaging the enemy forces opposing Mitchell Baylor and his troops.

Sheen, down to nine people including himself, cursed obscenely at the sight, having assumed that the mortars were doing much more damage than they were, and that he was losing a major asset instead of an annoyance. He turned to his partner:

“Hold off the Aurors, I need to deal with their Air Force.” Indeed Bouton and Hailey, while horrified at the sight of their friend dying, were enraged enough to want to keep going, and seemed to be preparing another dive. Sheen Summoned one of the Stinger launchers, and in the next breath two of the missiles. He quickly loaded one and aimed in the general direction of one of the flyers, which turned out to be Hailey. He pulled the trigger and the missile shot out of the launcher, locking on to the young man almost instantly.

Hailey had been looking in the general direction of Sheen to begin with, and saw the missile within a second of it being fired at him. He rocketed off as fast as he could, doing zero to 100 miles per hour at a rate that a Ferrari manufacturer would have been satisfied with. It

was to no avail though, as the missile had only Hailey and Bouton as heat sources available, and Hailey was enough. The missile exploded less than a foot behind him, destroying him and his broom. Bouton, about fifty feet higher in the air, watched this unfold and immediately hurled himself at Sheen, who was frantically reloading the launcher as Bouton fired hex after hex at him from the air. The Lycan hadn't achieved the level of chieftain by being panicky though, and he managed to pull the trigger on the launcher and dodge Bouton's hexes simultaneously. The missile shot into the air as Bouton, who had seen enough movies about this kind of thing and who had learned a dear lesson from his best friend's death, immediately shot toward the Athletic Field, which was about 300 meters away. The missile, finding nothing but Bouton to follow, swung around in pursuit and quickly ate up the ground.

Bouton pushed his Nike Air Trafficker broom as hard as he could as he ate up the meters toward the stadium in what seemed like hours, but in reality were only about ten seconds. The missile was almost on him when he reached the west stands, and he abruptly pulled up and somehow did a 90 degree upward turn and shot straight into the air. Mr. Stinger was agile, but not that agile, as it plowed into the west stands, destroying a good bit of them. Bouton thought about landing for a minute to catch his breath, but knew that he couldn't really afford to do that. Instead, he flew up higher than before and flew in a long arc until he reached the Auror main position. The Lycans had picked their fields of fire very well, and while they had only killed one Auror, they had only lost the two troops of their own to the dive bombing attack, none to the Aurors, who were very wary of approaching the machine gun positions.

After landing, Bouton was led to Mitchell Baylor, and after assuring him that his son was not only safe, but had assumed the battle leadership of his House, filled the Head Auror in on what he knew of the situation inside, which wasn't much. He knew that the faculty were not involved in the action above their own floor, and that Harry seemed to be in control of the fourth floor, but that was it. Baylor and all the others around him were full of quiet, but sincere praise for the handiwork of Bouton and his deceased friends, saying that their efforts were some of the bravest that they had ever seen. Jim appreciated the praise, but soon enough the deaths of Art and Ryan

hit him, and he was all but inconsolable, and played no further part in the rest of the engagement.

Fourth Floor:

“Booby trapped to high heaven eh? Please tell me that you’re joking with me inappropriately.”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure little brother, but I’m not. See for yourself, but for the love of Merlin don’t touch anything.” Harry did so, peering through the open doors, and seeing various packs of plastic explosives and claymore mines dotted along the walls, as well as tripwires criss-crossing the paths up and down. This was the work of Almeida and his three man crew, two of whom had explosives experience with the muggle Army, and who were now on the first and second floors doing who knows what.

“This is just wonderful, a contortionist would have trouble getting through that maze.” George had a suggestion:

“I say we question our friend here and see what we can get.”

“I’m really hoping that you have some Veritaserum stashed away in the shop.” Torture would probably take time that they didn’t have, with no guarantees of success or verification of success.

“Your hope is restored my good man. Dobby!” He popped in.

“Yes Twin George?” Unbeknownst to the twins, Dobby had marked both of them so that he and Winky could tell them apart, though it was a mark that only elves could see.

“In the third drawer of the black file cabinet in our bedroom is a vial of Veritaserum. Please fetch it for us.”

“Right away.” Dobby took about 20 seconds for his trip, and was back with the vial. After telling Dobby to stick around for a bit, Harry

walked over the Lycan and woke him up. All three Brits had their wands in his face when he came to, and Harry addressed him.

“Rise and shine, as you Americans are fond of saying. Now here’s the deal: We want to ask you a few questions, and we have a quite painless way of doing so, if you behave. If you do not behave, we will make you suffer incalculably, the wound you have will feel like a paper cut after we’re done working on you. So you and I are going to come to an understanding. You stay in human form, and my brothers and I won’t kill you. You make the change, and you’ll be dead so quickly that you won’t know what hit you. We are not in a mood to be trifled with, as four of your colleagues have discovered in the last few minutes. Do we have terms?” The Lycan, a man by the name of Troy Alden, answered almost immediately.

“Yes.”

“Good, now open your mouth.” Alden did, and Fred dropped the requisite amount of Veritaserum in. They waited a couple of minutes for it to take effect, during which time Harry sent Dobby up to Drew and Jonas, and then on to Claudia to tell them what’s going on. They were not to leave their Lounges though, Harry was very clear on that. Dobby came back in a couple of minutes with acknowledgements from Harry’s friends, as well as a quick sketch of the Jefferson Air Raid. The mortar fire, Harry noticed, had stopped, at least there was no noise coming from up above. He had a quick thought hoping that his plants were okay, but put it aside for now.

The Lycan Troy Alden had by now become docile enough for the questions:

“How many of you are there?”

“25 total.” Well, 20 now that the Brits had represented.

“All Lycans.”

“Yes.”

“How many were detailed to be inside?”

“14.”

“Including you?”

“Yes.” That left nine more that were somewhere in the building.

“How many of you are also magical?”

“Two.”

“Who are they, and where are they?”

“Tony Almeida inside, Michael Sheen outside.” He filed these names away for future reference.

“Where was Tony Almeida detailed to be?”

“Freelance, he was to supervise the wiring of the explosives.” Harry had felt that it was too much to hope for that Almeida be one of the dead ones on this floor.

“How many of your kind are on the fifth floor?”

“There shouldn’t be any right now.”

“They weren’t trying to invade up there?”

“No, they were just supposed to booby trap the kids’ doors and the stairwells.”

“So the two Lounge doors are wired also?”

“I don’t know what Lounge means.” Almeida and Sheen had apparently not been totally specific with terms and names.

“The two doors leading to the dorms are wired?”

“Yes.” Harry turned to Dobby.

“Get up there and tell Drew and Claudia that, tell them that under no uncertain terms are they to touch those doors.”

“Yes Harry.” He popped away, and Harry turned back to Alden, who had a Weasley wand in each ear, just waiting for him to do something rash.

“How many other targets are being attacked right now?”

“I don’t know.”

“But more than just Great Lakes, right?”

“Yes.”

“Besides the fifth floor and the stairwells, where is Almeida wiring his explosives?”

“All along the first and second floors.”

“Is it a booby trap or is there a plan to detonate by remote control or something?”

“Both.”

“When is it to be detonated?”

“I don’t know.” Harry looked at his watch, it was now 4:20, only 20 bloody minutes had elapsed from the time the first salvo of missiles had been launched.

“It’s 4:20 am right now, when is your extraction time?”

“Sometime before 5:00 am, that’s all I know. We are to get a signal between 4:45 and 5:00, that’s all I know, we’ll know it when we get it.”

Harry racked his brain for anything else he could ask him, but time was of the essence here. Dobby came back, and with a look to them conveyed that Harry's instructions had been received and understood. Harry decided that nothing further was to be gained from this, and his own wand was already pointed at Alden's chest.

“Stupefy!”

“Well Fearless Leader? That told us a lot, but what do we do about it?”

“Well we still need to help the faculty, but we also need to think about some kind of evacuation. That's for Murray to decide though, I can only imagine how pissed she's going to be at me for dragging you two over here.” They both looked indignant.

“We dragged ourselves thank you very much.” Harry rolled his eyes at them.

“I'm sure that she'll see it just like that.”

“What is it Dad always saying? A rebellion is only acceptable if it wins?”

“We can only hope she's heard of that.” Harry knew that he was full of dung, Murray wouldn't do anything to any of them after the use they'd been to her this morning.

“Enough you two, we need to think about what to do here. Harry, you know these people downstairs the best, are they really any good?”

“Well they are trapped down there, not a good sign, but Murray and the Defense guys are combat experienced.” All the while Harry was looking around, trying to figure out a way around the stairwells. He knew there were no floos available, and he just assumed that there were anti-Apparition and anti-portkey wards in place.

“The only way down there is right through the floor here. We’ll Abrumpere our way through the floor, which can’t be all that thick.....” George interrupted him.

“And be filled with bullet holes inside of two seconds?”

“Don’t be a spoilsport George. All right, that is a complication, sure. Hang on a second.....nothing says that we have to be the first ones down through the floor.” Both twins got evil grins on their faces.

“That’s right, we do have a few bodies we can use.”

“The guy the Proctor people nailed is probably out, they almost cut him in half.....the guy who drowned in the muck would work, and the guy you stalked Fred.”

“What about our live fish?” Harry looked him over, and just to be safe:

“Stupefy!” The twins looked at him curiously.

“Not in my movie.” A reference from *Scream* that he had been dying to appropriate for himself, having seen it during the Christmas break. Fred and George were like ‘um, okay Harry’, but they didn’t say anything.

“No, we might need him later, besides the Aurors will want to question him I’m sure.”

“Well we had better get going. How many holes? One or two?”

“Two would be best, one at each end of the hallway here.” Their corridor was right above the faculty’s office row.

“We’re going to need more than just us, probably at least two people per hole at a minimum.” Harry wanted no part of that, he was likely to get a hiding from Sophie as it was.

“No, whomever we pick, we’ll hurt the feelings and pride of everyone else, and I can’t be having that. Dobby and I will take one hole, won’t we Dobby?” Dobby was nodding vigorously as the twins were wondering at Harry putting student politics and hurt feelings above his own safety. They didn’t question him though, presumably he knew these people and what they would do.

“Of course Harry, I will dangle the body while you do the attacking.” Fred had already walked over to the swamp, and he retrieved the drowned Lycan. He cleaned him up well enough, and transfigured his clothes into Wizard’s robes. Rigor had not quite set in, so he performed Petrificus Totalus on him, and then he conjured a stick and put it in his right hand. Harry and George came over to the scene and both started applauding.

“That is first rate Fred, we’ll do the same to the other one. We should use Cutting Curses though, it should give them less of a warning. Dobby, go down and explain our plan to Murray and Ripley, tell them aim for the Lycans and try to disable them, we’ll Summon the machine guns up here.” Dobby privately thought that the plan was reaching a bit, but the three didn’t ask for his input, and he was off to Murray within a second.

Third Floor:

“All right Dobby, tell Harry and the twins that we’ll be ready. As soon as the floor collapses we’ll start our part of the attack.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“No other students are helping you?”

“No ma’am, Harry only trusts Fred and George for this, he doesn’t want to risk anyone else.” Those teachers in the room sighed in relief, while the Aurors were incredulous that three teenage Wizards had not only taken out five Lycans, but were set to butcher another four with this rather unlikely plan.

“Thank you Dobby, good luck.” Dobby was off, and Murray looked at the others, focusing on the skeptical looking Aurors.

“This is our plan, and we have no other choice but for it to work. They could set those charges off at any time and collapse the school. Harry and his Weasley twins will come through for us, and we have to do all we can to help them. Get ready, we have two minutes.”

Third Floor:

Fred and George at one end, Harry and Dobby at the other. Magical ropes had been conjured, and wrapped around the necks of the already dead Lycans, with sticks glued to their right hands. The live fish, Alden, had now been Stunned multiple times, Harry not wanting anything coming at their backs while the operation was being carried out. Once the bodies were readied up, Harry and George started lightly cutting a rough circle on the floor with their wands, though not all the way through. This done, the two sides readied their puppets. Fred had one, Dobby the other.

“You ready Harry?!”

“On three!”

“One!”

“Two!”

“Three!”

George and Harry stomped hard on their circles, punching the sections of the floor out and sending it crashing to the third floor below. Dobby and Fred released their puppets, who fell feet first to the ground below, only to be perforated by mass quantities of M-30 ammunition, the sheer mass of which kept the bodies upright long after a living being would have died. As the bodies were being drilled, Harry and George leaned through the holes and shouted:

“ACCIO GUN!” “ACCIO GUN!”

The M-30's were summoned right to the waiting hands of both young men.....who then howled in pain as the barrels of the guns were white hot from just being fired. They managed to keep them on their floor though, as the Aurors took over and fired Avada Kedavra after Avada Kedavra at the four Lycans, who had their M-16's still, but they had been caught by surprise just enough. They were all dead in seconds, as Aurors flooded the hallways. Greenleaf immediately ran to the nearest stairwell, and found that it too had been fully wired with plastic explosives and claymore mines. Auror Pod Leader Kate Atkinson went to the other side, and found it to be similarly laden. Murray and Lyman helped a still gimpy Ripley out into the hallway, as she called up:

“Harry, you guys all right up there?”

Harry and George were both verbally cursing as they held their burned hands and arms, but were in it enough to shout back.

“We're fine, more or less. Those bloody guns were hot, we should have Summoned the damn Lycans instead!” Murray had heard the howls, and figured that they weren't from cheering.

“Come down, we'll get Dr. Carter up here with some salve for the burns.” Lyman left to go floo the good doctor.

“Sure thing, but here's a present for you first. We got you a live Lycan, hopefully not for too long.” Harry gave Alden a kick, and the young Lycan fell through the hole and thudded down at Murray's feet, though not startling her. Fred and George jumped through their hole, and strode down the hall toward the only person they recognized, Murray. After sending Dobby to check on Sophie and company, Harry did likewise, landing gracefully on his feet in front of his Headmistress. He pointed at the newly created dead bodies.

“Are they dead?”

“All four, your plan worked perfectly Harry.” Fred and George joined them, and Harry pointed at them.

“Our plan, Professor Murray. Do you remember Fred and George?” Murray smiled for the first time in awhile.

“How could I forget my daughter’s employers. Thank you, both.”

“Just looking out for the young one ma’am, we knew he would do something foolhardy and brave, it’s his lot in life.” The Aurors gathered around them and were introduced to the Brits, with lots of handshaking and compliments all around. Dobby came back and reported the situation normal upstairs, all four Houses knowing that they should not leave.....not that Shawnee could leave, and Jefferson only through the roof. Harry had one more quick assignment for him.

“Is Drew’s dad outside?” Atkinson, the Auror in charge here, replied:

“He should be.”

“Dobby, go find out what happened with the guys who flew out through the roof. I noticed that there were no more explosions up top, see what’s going on.” Dobby was away, and the Brits huddled, sort of, with Murray, Atkinson, and the Defense guys.

“Our live fish told us that there are explosives on every stairwell and under the first and second floors. The only way they’re not there, is if he was misled.”

“Highly unlikely, but you never know. I think we need to marshal the house elf staff to see if the explosives are there.” Fred had a salient question:

“Why haven’t you used them before now?”

“Because we haven’t really needed to, and our house elves will not participate in any attacks on anyone, be it Kindred, Lycan, or Wizard. I’m amazed that Dobby is liberated enough to have helped you like he did.”

“Dobby will do anything the youngster here wants him to, so far anyway. What are our options if the floors are wired? Do you have enough portkeys to get everyone to safety?”

“We do, but the wards are up and are simply too complicated to bring down, especially since we are essentially confined to the upper three floors here. We dare not tunnel through the floor like you guys did, we might set them off.”

“Do you recognize those names, Sheen and Almeida.” Heyman laughed bitterly.

“Tony was my roommate here for seven years, I never knew he had been Lycan infected though. I wonder for how long?” He trailed off. Murray was next.

“Michael Sheen was another schoolmate of ours, both of them were very smart and cunning, much like your Slytherins back in Britain, and they were very close friends while they were here, probably on the level of you three. The building hasn’t changed any from when they were here, they were the right ones to lead the attack. We had long heard rumors about Michael, but he was so good at covering his tracks. Some of us even thought that he was working for the muggle CIA.”

Dobby then came back, and filled them in on the dive bomber assault, and the deaths of Ryan Chappelle and Art Hailey. Heyman, rocked by the news of more deaths, nevertheless had an idea.

“Well send everyone in Shawnee and Jefferson out on their brooms, those that don’t have one can ride pillion.” Greenleaf shook his head, he didn’t much care for Heyman anyway, but he really disliked this idea.

“And send them where? To be targeted by more of those missiles? They sound like the Stinger variety, heat seekers. God only knows where the Lycans managed to get them from, they’re incredibly expensive. When we get out of this mess, we need to start checking

the muggle news wires for any stories about ordnance facilities robbed. The mortars and M-16's don't come cheap either."

"I knew I should have asked that guy about something else. I'm new at this you know." Greenleaf just patted him on the shoulder.

"You've done very well Harry, don't worry."

"What about the floo from the offices? We could cut more holes in the floor and get them out that way." Murray looked pensive.

"No Josh, the same problems apply, where do we send them? We know from Harry's fish that there are more attacks being carried out. What place is safe at this moment?" They all fell into thought about just that. Harry and the twins knew that the shop and Isla de Marauder were totally safe, but that was the last resort. All three were amazed that there were no contingency plans for this kind of thing in place, not knowing about the lack of attacks historically when it came to schools. Growing up in a land shrouded by Voldemort, they simply assumed that this kind of thing happened all the time, with each country's own version of Voldemort. The twins only kept quiet to spare Harry any repercussions, and badly wanted to question the Americans.

Carter now appeared, with some burn ointment, magically enhanced, for Fred and Harry, who gratefully slathered it on their hands and forearms. Murray called for Raffles, the major-domo of the Great Lakes house elf staff, and explained to him about the explosives. He agreed without hesitation to do the checking himself, while firmly declining Dobby's assistance, and popped away. George turned to Harry and muttered to him

"Why doesn't he like Dobby?"

"I guess he thinks Dobby's too wild or something, with the sports kits he wears, and how popular he is with the students. I'm not sure of any specific details, Dobby doesn't really like to talk about it."

Heyman and Greenleaf were still arguing about the evacuation, and Harry was waiting for an opportunity to jump in when Raffles suddenly came back.....with a bullet hole in his chest. He gasped out.

“They’re on the first floor, lots of explosives.....and a Wizard leading them.” He passed out, and Carter rushed him down to the med station, but to no avail, within a few minutes, Raffles had died. Carter came back to tell them.

Harry had rarely seen Murray angry period, but this was a new.....well, low. Just then, a Magis Sonorus voice called out to them.

“Hello Wizards and Witches. How do you like our show so far? I’m betting that some Aurors have flooded in by now, while more still are being killed outside, not that they will do much for you.” It was Tony Almeida. He had a raspy voice, but it rang clear enough throughout the building.

“See how easy it was to get at them, at your children? You really should have looked out for them better Joanne. Without your British import you would be in very bad shape right now, oh yes, I know all about Harry Potter. By now you have probably learned that the building is wired with many, many explosives. Your little kids cannot escape, and I know you will not abandon them. Perhaps you need an example of what is to come.” The ‘transmission’ stopped, and everyone on the third floor seemed to freeze. Then it happened:

“ BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!” As charges underneath a certain section of the hallway floor exploded, collapsing said floor and sending a few people down to the floor below, which in turn then exploded, sending down to the ground floor, and into the Dining Hall. Among them were a still injured Ripley, Lyman, and our three Brits. The delay had been for a certain Lycan/Wizard to do a quick scan. Our players were met by Almeida and friends, rifles at the ready.

At The Pathfinder School:

The Lycan attack had, by now, fizzled as the missile team expended all of its ordnance, and the attack team had not gotten close enough to do any damage. The Stingers did do quite a bit of damage to the mountain and the school foundation, but no students or faculty were hurt in the operation. The Lycan national leadership, and there was a structure there, had considered this location to be an almost pointless waste of valuable resources, but they ultimately resolved that the symmetry of attacking all four magical schools outweighed all of that. The Lycan contingent, the smallest one of the eight at only 20 men originally, retreated down the mountain after about 25 minutes, and then converged at the rendezvous point to portkey back to their home base. They lost 12 of their number, mostly due to the Incendio fire from the faculty above. All 12 of the bodies were either incinerated in the fires, or tumbled down the mountain to be collected by the Auror disposal teams later. There were no prisoners taken by either side.

At The Salem Witches Institute:

The Aurors, all of whom were doing battle with the Lycans outside the school, were getting better than they got, but this was still taking too long as they waited for more shoes to drop. The Lycans had a seemingly endless supply of portkeys as they popped around the outsides of the wards, taking a long series of shots with their automatic weapons, and waiting for the Wizards to re-deploy. Once the Wizards got into positions, the Lycans would disappear again. There was no set pattern, once the Aurors looked back on it, and clearly the Lycans had been studying past failures and learning from them. Eventually the Lycans portkeyed away one time too many for the Aurors, and they didn't come back. The Aurors had lost five troops in the fight, while dealing out 8 fatalities to the Lycans, none injured on the Lycan side either, so no prisoners.

At Tecumseh:

The conservative strategy of Burke and Hill, a longtime mentor/protégé partnership, paid off far more than they had any right to expect it to. The Burke/Hill and Aylesworth pairs split up, and spent 30 minutes taking potshots and quickly ducking behind columns and around corners. It was all to little avail though, as the Tulsa based Aurors had chosen to concentrate on wiping out the Lycans outside,

so no help was coming from that quarter. The Lycans took the fire from the two teams and went about their business despite the intermittent harassment. They were not trying for any kidnappings, none of the attack groups were really, that was just a bit of license on the part of Michael Sheen during his warm-up speech.

They got their explosives work done in short order, but the two Wizard teams knew all along what was going on, and were able to communicate this, through the house elf staff, to the rest of the faculty and students. They decided on a proactive approach to evacuation, and after finding out which direction the battle outside was coming from, they blew out the side of the building on the section opposite the battle. The kids were taken out double file and led outside the limit of anti-portkey wards, where the students were evacuated, in teams of five, to the Southwest Auror Headquarters. The evacuations were half over when the school exploded behind them, showering debris and other various and sundry things all over the remaining students. The Lycan v. Auror battle raged on for another 10 minutes after that, with the enraged Aurors taking chances that they perhaps would not have otherwise.....or perhaps should have taken sooner, a distinction that would be argued about quite a bit later.

They advanced quickly with an exhausting battery of Avada Kedavra, taking more than a few bullets in the process, but advancing quickly all the same. This surprised the Lycans to the point that they did not have time to mass together for the portkeys out, so only six of the overall group managed to escape. Three had been killed inside by Burke, Hill, and the Aylesworths, and another 14 outside. That left two potential prisoners, one who got away simply by doing the change, and another who was in fact captured. That Lycan, Larry Platt, was the only Lycan captured in the battles, along with Troy Alden, captured by Harry and the twins.

First Floor Great Lakes:

The five Wizards crashed through the two floors hard, all of them landing on their backs or on their butts. Almeida and his boys, just five of them now including him, were ready and opened fire with their M-16's. Ripley was the nearest target, and took a few more bullets for the team, none of them immediately fatal. He went down though, and

his legs were again riddled with bullets, and a few shrapnel fragments from the explosions. Lyman's comeback to Harry back in August:

"I have wand talents thank you very much."

Was proven out as he whipped his wand up and fired:

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" His shot nailed one of the Lycans right between the eyes, dropping him like a rock. Another Lycan took aim at Fred, who was gingerly getting up, and shot him in the back with a three round burst.

Fred was still wearing the vest though, and the bullets, even at a 15 foot distance, simply bounced off. The earlier salvo that hit Harry had not even left any marks, neither did this one. Harry and George fired on Fred's attacker, as Harry used his first killing curse, though more than likely not his last.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" "AVADA KEDAVRA!" Both curses hit home, as another Lycan went down. Almeida saw this, and changed his mind from finishing off Ripley, and he aimed right at the George's chest from less than 10 feet away. Harry saw this and as Almeida was pulling the trigger, quick drew his Voldemort wand out:

"REPULSAR!"

Hitting George in the back, pushing him out of the way and down to the ground as the bullets passed right where he would have been. Almeida barely flinched, and before Harry could turn around, fired a three round burst that hit Harry in the left shoulder and upper chest, dropping him like the proverbial rock. Lyman responded by missing Almeida with a Killing Curse, but instead hitting another one of his troops, though not before taking a bullet in the arm for his troubles. Now the only ones unhurt were Fred and George, both of whom were now concentrating on Harry and how to protect him. They whipped up their wands at Almeida and his last remaining comrade, who had their guns up as well, having barely used up any ammunition in the relatively closed in firefight. Ripley had passed out from the totality of

his injuries, and Lyman was scrambling around to get his non-wand hand around his stick.

Harry was lying on the ground, blood not quite pouring out yet, as he waited for the next bullets to come at him. He was fully conscious, and in a large amount of pain, but still very lucid. He looked up and saw the standoff, and heard Almeida clear his throat.

“Enough. You’ve proven your point Harry Potter.” He put his wand to his throat.

“All you teachers and Aurors up there, you are to stay put, or I will fire the entire building. I might die in the rubble, but so will your precious children, don’t test me!” He turned back to Harry, Fred, and George.

“Now what the hell am I to do with you three? This is not your war you know, you have that Voldemort moron back home to deal with. You really want this?” Harry croaked out.

“This is my home damn you.” Almeida, who had vaguely Latino features, though with some Polish in there too, just smiled.

“Well I guess I don’t blame you there, I do have fond memories of this place believe it or not. This would be so much easier if you Wizards would have just stayed neutral like you always have. Put your wand down Josh, you never could do anything with your left hand and you know it.”

“Screw you Tony. How long ago did they turn you? Was it Sheen who did it?”

“This is not the time for such a conversation unfortunately, but maybe someday Josh. The stories I could tell you. Now I’m going to let you guys live for now and take my exit, you don’t fire on me, and I won’t on you. I’m sure this goes against your every principle Harry, but you’re leaking blood by the pint here, no point in exerting yourself any further. It might seem as though we have each other cornered, but it only seems that way.” He put up his hand and did a twirling

motion with his index finger. His remaining associate ran out the door, followed by a slowly backing away Almeida. Once he was gone, Lyman shouted up to the third floor that they were gone.

The twins immediately knelt by Harry, and Lyman by Ripley. Lyman spoke first:

“He’s hurt pretty bad, if we don’t get him to Carter pretty quick he’s in trouble. If one of you guys could levitate him back up there.” Murray and the Aurors had apparently taken Almeida’s threats seriously, and were only now looking over the edge. Fred had finally had enough.

“You people really don’t have a bloody floo on every floor? What the hell kind of hot dog stand are you folks running here!” No one loved an argument more than Lyman, but getting Ripley and Harry to the med station was his focus now. Harry, with George’s help, had now gotten to his feet, though he was very unsteady on his feet. The bullets had all passed through, two in the shoulder and one through his pectoral muscle, thankfully missing the major veins and arteries. The blood was still trickling out, and he knew that he would be sleeping tonight in a med station somewhere.

“Just get him up there, and no, there isn’t a floo on the ground floor or the second floor, only in the third floor offices.” Fred did as he was asked though, and levitated Ripley up to Murray, where she and Greenleaf quickly sent him down to Carter, who was told that Harry would be along shortly. Lyman looked over at him, all the while holding his broken forearm, which was still bleeding.

“Your turn Harry.” Harry, on the other hand, had no intention of going anywhere. He was looking around, trying to put aside the pain and figure out a way out of this mess.

“Not yet, we have to think of something to stop these explosives. Dobby!” He popped in and did not notice Harry’s condition at first.

“Yes.....no Harry, you are going to the med station right this second, I will brook no arguments.” Harry’s voice showed how tired he was.

“Fortunately for me Dobby, I’m your employer as well as your friend, so I’m going to do as I please. Go outside and see how the battle is progressing, and then check out the Quidditch Pitch, see if any of the Lycans are near it.” Dobby looked like he was about to continue the argument, job be damned, but Harry got that look on his face and pointed toward the outside. George got his good shoulder as he held him up, and Harry pocketed his wands, and Summoned a few other things from the ground.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that Almeida is going to fire the school any second now. Are there any kinds of barriers we can put up between the second and third floors?” All three of them looked pointedly at Lyman, as Murray and Atkinson were shouting down, wondering where Harry was.

“That’s a question for Janel or Elizabeth, or even Greenleaf, it’s more in their milieu.” A rope was being lowered as they spoke, more a hint than anything else. The twins saw the writing on the wall and gave in, and before Harry could object, they levitated him up to the top, followed by Lyman, and after that they shimmied up the rope, showing heretofore physical talents not hinted at. Once they got up, they saw that Murray and Harry were arguing.

“You need medical attention Harry, you’re about to bleed to death!” Harry either couldn’t raise his voice, or chose not to, he would never tell the twins which.

“And I will as soon as we figure this out. Besides, I’m not going under the knife in a med station that could be buried in an explosion.” Murray was about to argue the point when she realized that he was correct.

“I’m not trying to be insubordinate or disrespectful, but you need every brain here until we stop this. Now what about those barriers? A: would they work? B: if so, can we get them up in time?” All eyes turned to Janel Maloney and Elizabeth Westin. Maloney spoke first.

“They can work if we place them just right, and we’re wasting time with every second we debate. I’ll be right back.” Westin seemed just as sure, and Harry wondered if they had been talking about it before he and the twins had returned upstairs.

“We can save the floors, but probably not the stairways, they’re too loaded with the bombs.” Heyman now flooded in from his office, he had been talking with Isaac Jaffee back at Midwest Auror Headquarters for the last 10 minutes.

“They Lycans have been beaten back at Pathfinder and have retreated at Salem.” Murray now turned to him.

“And Tecumseh?”

“Destroyed, but with all students and faculty evacuated. Apparently they blew holes in the side of building away from the gun battle outside, and portkeyed away when they reached the outer edge of the ward zone.”

“Where else were they attacking?”

“Corrinus, Flackter, and Chrokar, all seemed to be diversionary efforts designed to tie our Auror friends down. We’re the only school still engaged, more Auror support should be arriving outside at any minute.” Maloney came back in, walking in from the outside, not from the floo. She strode over to Murray’s desk and slammed a book down. She took a highlighter from the desk and scribbled all over the page.

“That’s what we have to use.”

Aegis Inivus Obmolior

“It can extend up to 10 square feet person, so if we use everyone, we can get it up in a couple of minutes.” Murray wasted little time:

“Everyone spread out, do your own offices and living quarters completely. Aurors, cover the hallway. Fred, George, if you will assist Dr. Carter and Nurse Burbank down in the med station please. Harry, you will help me in here, I don’t want you to leave my sight until this is all over. Go now.” Everyone dispersed, and Harry and Murray quickly took care of her office and living quarters, and with the necessary overlapping, it took about three minutes.

Outside on the Great Lakes perimeter:

The Lycans were running out of ammunition, despite a portkey gift from the home office that replenished them, and Sheen was ready to give the all clear signal. This was taking too long, he thought worriedly, Almeida was taking far longer than he should have to place the charges. Maybe he had taken some hostages, Sheen figured. Sheen too knew about Harry being in the building, he read The Chronicle as much as the next man, but he had discounted most of the stories about Harry as mere hyperbole, and did not factor him in as a problem when the planning had been worked out. As the Lycans got down to their last belts of M-30 ammunition and their last few clips for their M-16’s, Sheen saw Almeida and his last remaining henchman sprinting out of the school. Sheen quickly took a modified flashlight out of his pocket and shone it up to the sky, it flashed bright red. The extraction signal.

The remaining Lycans all went rock and roll with their ammunition as they ran toward either Sheen, who had disillusioned himself, or Almeida, who had probably set a 400 meter record for someone of his age. The Aurors managed to nail two more of them from long range, but Sheen and Almeida were not among them as they portkeyed away, but not before Almeida squeezed something.. Mitchell Baylor, slightly wounded himself from a ricochet round, ran with his team toward the school only to be stopped by a muffled explosion that seemed to destroy the bottom two levels of the school and all along the sides.....but the building did not totally collapse.

The shields had held, and floors three through five at Great Lakes, stairwells excluded, were being held up magically as they seemed to almost float down on top of the powder that was formerly the classrooms, Dining Hall and various other rooms. When the upper floors landed, they shook for what seemed like minutes, but nothing was destroyed, at least nothing that contained a living person or elf.

Meanwhile, inside the building, all 300 plus students and faculty had their hearts in their throats as the school came settling down, at some tilted angles as there were some parts of the first and second floors that were not quite turned into powder. Harry, unsteady anyway, walked out into the hallway and looked at the exploded parts from before. He could see the hole, but the explosives had not been allowed to force themselves upward. He swayed a little bit, the bleeding had been stopped by a Murray provided bandage, and finally collapsed toward the floor.

Only to be caught by the twins, who had come out from Murray's office looking for him. They kept him upright as his vision began to fog over a little bit.

"All right junior, I think you've had enough for today. You saved us both you know." Harry tried to shake his head.

"Rubbish, you bailed me out yet again."

"Not so little brother, you pushed me out of the way when the bullets came. You gave Fred that vest to wear, or he would have been shot in the back."

"We're family, family does that kind of thing.....our family more often than others I think though." Harry tried to laugh, but his injuries, with his still cracked ribs from before, had finally caught up to him. The twins dragged him back into Murray's office.

"The little bastard here needs to be taken downstairs.....if you still had some stairs. I'll go with him, George will go upstairs with you lot and reassure some panicky Cortez people." Heyman had already climbed up through one of the puppet holes and was attempting to

negotiate the twin swamps in front of Cortez and Proctor. George joined him, and muttered a few words with some complicated motions of his wand. The swamp went bye bye, and Heyman looked curiously at George, of whom he had heard much about but never met until a few minutes earlier.

“Sorry sir, trade secret.” Heyman then persuaded the Proctor students into letting him through the barricade, convincing them that he wasn’t some Lycan under Polyjuice. That potion wouldn’t work on a non-magical anyway, but they didn’t know that. George had gone over to Cortez, where took care of the swamp and unsealed the door. He yelled into the hole Sophie had made, though no one was monitoring it at the moment.

“Warrick! Sophie! Reiko! It’s George, I’m coming in.” He gingerly opened the door and prayed that the kids wouldn’t be too trigger-happy. They weren’t though, and he was quickly besieged not by spells, but by questions. He finally had to raise his hands.

“QUIET, ALL OF YOU!” That got them settled down in a hurry, as they now noticed that he had more than a little of Harry’s blood on him.

“For those of you who haven’t been told, I’m George Weasley. Okay, here’s the deal: The school is no longer under attack, no kidding. The explosion you heard and felt was on the bottom two floors, but we managed to create some barriers that stopped the explosives from going up to the top three floors. Don’t ask me how, just know that it worked. As far as we know there were only three students killed, one next door at Proctor and two from Jefferson. Everyone else is okay except for a few wounded. You are to stay here until that Heyman guy or Professor Murray comes to tell you differently. I repeat though, you are in no immediate danger any longer. Questions can wait until one of your teachers gets here.” He pointed at the gang.

“You three, come with me.” They left, a bit stunned that their jokester of a friend was so hard looking. Once out the door, now closed again, he addressed them in a somewhat softer tone of voice.

“All right then, Harry is hurt and is in the Hospital Wing, or Med Station or whatever you Yanks call it. He’s going to be fine, a few bullets won’t kill Harry. I need you lot to come with me to the top floor.” The three were so stunned that they didn’t argue with him, even Sophie, as he proceeded to blast his way through the ceiling. Brooking no questions, he had them get him up, after which he levitated them up as well. He approached the Shawnee door, and called out for Dobby.

“Yes Twin George?”

“Go in there and have them all get into their rooms, I need to get this door open.” He did, and George contemplated how to do this. He had seen the Proctor blast, which should, in theory, have used the same type and quantity of explosives. Just then, a Pod of Aurors came up through George’s homemade opening, apparently with the same idea. Kate Atkinson was the leader of Pod 12.

“You going to blow the door?”

“As soon as Dobby tells me that the kids are back far enough.”

“Good idea, we’re going to need to figure out a new stairway pretty soon.”

“My Lord, are you people really thinking of staying here?”

“There are Advanced Wards we can put in place to make sure that this never happens again.” Dobby stopped George’s impolite reply as he came out to tell them that the coast was clear. George had him go to Jefferson with the same message, and then readied himself to blast the door.

“Stand back you lot.” They did, and he stepped back 10 feet and aimed at the door.

“Repulsar!”

That was just enough pressure to blow the door in and turn it into a hail of wooden shrapnel. Shawnee would need a few new computers and three new televisions, but the students were all hiding as instructed, and no one was hurt, Shawnee being the only House not to take any casualties this day. He took Reiko and Warrick aside.

“Give them the same briefing I gave you, then get back downstairs, Sophie and I will take care of Jefferson.” They nodded and went inside, along with two of Atkinson’s people. The other five of them went along to Jefferson, where George repeated the procedure. As Atkinson and her two subordinates went inside, George stopped Sophie from following.

“Look, Harry’s going to be okay, he took two bullets to the shoulder and one to the chest, but he was functioning okay after that and he helped with the barrier making. Our boy did well today Sophie.”

“As long as he’s going to be okay.”

“He will be, I don’t remember him saying anything about that Carter guy being a quack, so I’m assuming he’s in good hands. Now I want to make sure ahead of time that you aren’t going to kill Harry yourself for not letting you fight with him.....well, us.”

“I know why he wouldn’t let us, but it was still hard.”

“I’m sure it was, and you wouldn’t be loyal if you three hadn’t wanted to go with him. But it was for the best Sophie, Harry would have gone crazy with worry if you had been out there, and trust me when I tell you, we needed him totally sane out there. He saved my life, pushed me out of the way when the bullets came. Fred and I, and this school, needed our little brother out there, not your boyfriend. They’re two different people Sophie, at least in battle.” Sophie didn’t disagree, but a few tears came out anyway, as George awkwardly put his arm around her. Drew and Jonas came out now, and George was introduced to the Marauder he hadn’t yet met.

“Good to meet you, Harry says a lot of nice things about you Drew.”

“Likewise George, I’ve been hearing about you two for months. Um, if you don’t mind me asking, are you bleeding?”

“Nah, that’s Junior’s blood.....sorry, Harry’s. He’s in the med station right now getting operated on I’m betting.”

Indeed he was, Carter and Burbank were working on Ripley, while Julie Parrish and Ben Taylor, the doctor and nurse respectively for Pathfinder/Tecumseh, healed up Harry. The med station had not been impacted by the blast, other than a few things falling to the ground, though it was odd to see the faculty offices right above through the holes in the floor. Harry never lost consciousness throughout the procedure, and Taylor, a rather chatty fellow, talked him through what they were doing to him. This was the same arm/shoulder that Lockhart had ‘experimented’ with years ago, and he groggily told the story of that to an amused Parrish and Taylor.

Murray did make it upstairs, going from House to House to assure them that the danger had passed. She collected George to come back down with her after she was done, saying that Harry was just about done being worked on.

“Look, I owe you and your brother, we all do. Thank you George, the loyalty you two have to Harry is quite inspiring.”

“You’re welcome Professor Murray. It’s a good thing we were visiting Harry with your permission today wasn’t it?” Murray gave a full smile for the first time in awhile.

“Yes it was George, very fortuitous. Results govern all. When you two get here officially in April, you will be sorted directly into Cortez by my decree, chairs be damned.” George wasn’t so bashful that he wasn’t planning to ask for that very thing, but he didn’t mention this.

“That’s very nice of you, a proper reward for our efforts. Fred and Harry will be very happy.” He was not being sarcastic, and Murray was relieved that he was taking things so calmly.

“Good, now I need to go do some paperwork to account for you two being here, and do a few other things, like figure out how to rebuild the school and all. Just let me know when you two take off, stay as long as you need to.” George checked his watch, it was now 5:05 am here in America.

“Thank you ma’am.” George reached out his hand, and she took it, a sign of respect for the both of them. He walked over to the floor and went downstairs, while Murray assembled the faculty and all Aurors present, for a meeting. The featured guest was Abel Rosnovski, the great great great grandson of the architect of Great Lakes and Tecumseh, and who had kept up the family business of designing and constructing magical houses and buildings. He had been awoken almost immediately after attacks commenced, and gave a quick report to them:

“Tecumseh has been totally destroyed, Salem has suffered a modicum of damage, with Pathfinder simply needing some structural repair in its foundation. You folks here are in the middle of that spectrum.”

“How long will it take to get us up and running again?”

“Tecumseh is going to be the first to be rebuilt I would think, then you, followed by Pathfinder. Salem will probably get worked on in the summer, most of their damage can be fixed with Reparo from what I’m told, given that the damage was all from long range.”

“Even the missile damage?”

“Yes Professor Heyman, even that. The order of course is a political decision. I understand that President Chabon is working on a temporary relocation plan for the Tecumseh students as we speak.”

“And the cost?”

“Probably along the lines of \$40-45 million, give or take.” All but Murray gasped, but she had been privately assured that the government’s newest cash crop, the DVD movie disc, was due for

worldwide launch later in the year. The royalties from that bit of technology would keep the coffers full and pay for full reconstruction of the four schools. It was nice to have connections.

“How long will it take to rebuild Tecumseh?”

“About a week, once we get the go ahead. We can conceivably start this afternoon, I am confident that it will be given top priority. The cost of replacing what was inside is another matter, and will likely take longer to solve.”

“What damage was done to the Alley’s? What about the Congressional Building?”

“Bullet damage only, the Alley attacks were only to cause damage and tie down Aurors. The Congressional Building is so secure that they never even got close to it, though it did suffer some Stinger damage. I came here via Flackter and nothing was so badly damaged that it cannot be quickly repaired.” Rosnovski was a Chicago native, and Flackter was his Alley of choice. Murray stood up.

“Thank you Abel, I’m sure you have many other people to see today, so we won’t keep you.” The man smiled gratefully.

“No problem Joanne, my people will be in touch a few hours from now, after we get our orders from President Chabon.” He left via the floo, and Murray turned to her staff.

“Obviously there were to be no classes today anyway, being a Saturday and all, and there is a decent chance that we might be able to get them going on Monday in some fashion, both in the basement and in our offices here and in the Lounges. Now we need to contact the families of Ross Karver, Art Hailey, and Ryan Chappelle, and all the other families for that matter, but those three first. Jeannie Baum and Harry Potter are in the med station right now, and knowing Harry he won’t be there for long. Let him do as he likes though, within reason.” Toby Ziegler was fidgeting in his chair, and finally came out with what he had been wrestling with.

“Shouldn’t we be discussing the possibility of changing locations? No offense to our Auror friends here, but I see no reason why this kind of attack can’t be repeated.” She had been waiting for something like that.

“That is not up to us Toby, like Abel said, it’s a political decision.” Ziegler was undeterred.

“What will you press for?”

“We can put the entire area under Fidelius, that way no one can see us but those we want to. We can make magical modifications to the surrounding landscape and buildings, so that even from the air, Sheen and Almeida cannot harm us again.” Josh Lyman now got into it, after some hard thinking.

“Why wasn’t this done before now? That Weasley kid was right, we were not very well prepared for this kind of thing, our wards were little more than muggle Tornado Warnings. If our British imports hadn’t bailed us out, we would be planning the funerals of a lot of dead kids right now.” Murray was in full agreement with the sentiment, though not the timing of it.

“This is not the time or place for recriminations Josh and you damn well know it. We have three dead children to see to, and we need to let our students grieve for them, and adjust to what happened. We’ve all been through a serious trauma here, our lives have been threatened, and only four people in this school have experienced that before, two of whom are now in the med station.” Ripley and Harry, she was not yet counting Fred and George it seemed.

“Now I want at least five of you in every Lounge for the remainder of the day and night to take care of any counseling of the students, with particular attention to Proctor and Jefferson. Riley, I want you to work with the House Elves for the meals, which will all be in the Lounges for the time being.” Poole had sat there quietly, relieved that the school and his home were not more damaged than they were. Since the Quidditch announcing fiasco, he had said the same thing every time Murray told him to do something:

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good, all of you but David and Dick please leave now.” They did, though she was a little disquieted to see Ziegler and Lyman leaving together, talking intently to one another. Left in the room now were the Aurors and Heyman and Greenleaf.

“Mitchell, I would like to be a part of the questioning of the Lycan Harry captured.”

“That’s fine Joanne, we’re going to give him until this afternoon to wait, to let the Veritaserum from Harry get out of his system.”

“I’m sure I can find something to do until then. Dick, I want you to go downstairs to the med station, and when Harry is lucid enough, get a written transcription of everything he experienced, and then forward a copy to the President’s Office, and Jacobson’s as well. No one had more contact with the Lycan invaders than he did, his insights will be invaluable. And make sure that Tom will be okay, he took the worst of the damage among the living.”

“Right, he’s a tough old bird though, he’ll be fine.” Greenleaf was a year younger than the 44 year old Ripley, and never let him forget it.

“David, I want you to go on Radio Wizard America and assure all the parents who are listening that things are under control here. I’m sure that will give Sheen and Almeida a laugh if they’re tuning in, but we have no other choice. We have to keep up the illusion of control, even if we’re barely hanging on to it by the skin of our teeth.”

“Got it. You’ll contact the Karvers, Haileys, and Chappelles?”

“The first two, yes. Ryan Chappelle’s parents disavowed him a long time ago. The Boutons have been taking him in during the holidays.” This had pre-dated Heyman’s appointment as Deputy, so he hadn’t been aware of it.

“We’ll reconvene here no later than 8:00 am, hopefully I will have something from President Chabon by then.” The two men nodded, and took their leave. Murray made her floo calls, and promised them that their sons’ bodies would be ready for them by the afternoon. She requested that the funerals, or at least a funeral, for each of them be held at school, so that their friends could grieve, and permission was given. She did not get torn a new rear end by the families however, like she had feared. Art Hailey’s father wept with pride when she told him the story of his son’s death, a hero’s death. Likewise David Bouton felt much the same way when told about the way Ryan had died. Ross Karver was raised by his mother as a single parent, and she too felt pride that her son was in the front line to defend his House, only that way had he been in the line of fire to be killed by the explosion. There was no hate toward anyone spoken, though the Lycans had just acquired a few new strident enemies, but that would be more manifested later.

It only took 20 minutes to make the floo calls, but Joanne had rarely felt more rung out. She looked at her watch and wanted to scream, it would be a long day. She reached for the telephone on her desk, the only one in the school. She hit a pre-programmed number, and then spoke into the phone.

“Dr. Murray please, it’s his wife calling, we had a bit of an emergency here.” She waited a very long minute.

“I’m fine Neil, we had a situation here.”

Flashback a little while to the med station:

Parrish and Taylor finished up on Harry in short order. They had his chart from the September and assured him that his injuries were no worse in scope. Bullet wounds were a much studied discipline in Wizard medical circles, and most Wizard doctors and nurses had some muggle hospital experience. Fred and George watched the whole thing, trying to be as non-threatening as they could, but their serious expressions were not lost on everyone else. Soon thereafter, Josh Lyman escorted the rest of the gang down, as Harry lay there, more or less conscious. Sophie rushed over to him and hugged him.

“Are you okay?”

“Well, I’ve been shot.” As Harry has said earlier to his Lycan fish, way wrong answer.

“I am so not in the mood for your sense of humor Mister.” Harry adopted a contrite look that he didn’t really feel.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? There had better be a long list of things.”

“Well for stating the obvious just now, and.....” He trailed off, clearly not able to think of much else.

“For going out to fight that battle, that’s what you’re supposed to say next.”

“Only I’m not sorry for that. I mean I can lie if you want me to Sophie, but it’s a slippery slope once you start lying to your loved ones.” That didn’t stop her, though at no point was she actually shouting or otherwise raising her voice. The other Americans just looked at Harry like ‘you made your bed there buddy’.

“Just tell me one good reason why you had to do it.”

“Because it was necessary.” She waited for more than that, and when it wasn’t forthcoming....

“And who decides what is necessary?”

“Well this morning, I did.”

“That’s it?”

“It worked didn’t it? I’m now the proud owner of a few Lycan scalps hanging from my belt, figuratively of course. Remus will shit in his

pants when he finds out about that.” Sophie finally started smiling, to everyone’s quiet relief.

“I’m sure all of your people back there will have options when they next go to the bathroom, after they hear about all this.” Harry saw the meter swinging toward him, and he pounced.

“No doubts there. At least tell me you understand why I didn’t take you with me.”

“I do, Reiko and George have both been beating that into me with a soft stick. I know you didn’t want to have to worry about me, or any of us.”

“That, and I needed people I trusted to watch out for the other students. You needed to be there to watch their backs.” And I don’t trust you in any kind of battle yet, Harry thought but didn’t say.

“Are you in a lot of pain?”

“No, they have me potioned up. I’ll be fine by this time tomorrow. Fred, George, how’s Professor Ripley doing over there?” Fred had intermittently been checking on the Defense teacher.

“He’s still out, but they got all the bullets and he’ll be fine after some rest.”

“I’m glad, he’s a good guy.” They stuck around and chatted for awhile, plying Harry with his favorite Dr. Pepper by the glassful. Harry was about to kick the twins out of the room and back to Britain, when a group of people swept in. At the head of them, flanked by two deadly serious looking Auror bodyguards, was a tall man with long black hair, in his mid-40’s. After a brief stop at Ripley’s bed, he moved over to Harry’s. He greeted Harry with a smile, and an outstretched hand.

“Hello there Harry, my name is Michael Chabon.” That’s President Michael Chabon, he didn’t need to add.

Hogwarts Great Hall

Lunchtime GMT

Dumbledore, after furious whispering between himself, Remus, and McGonagall, rose and cleared his throat very loudly. The students quickly fell silent, as they awaited his words. Those who thought quickly enough assumed it was about Draco, but they were wrong.

“I have an announcement to make, one that I wish I did not have to. Early this morning in America, werewolves armed with muggle firearms and explosives assaulted eight targets: Flackter Alley in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Chrokar Alley in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Corrinus Alley in San Francisco, California; The Congressional Building in Boston, Massachusetts; The Pathfinder School in Mount Fremont, California; The Salem Witches Institute in Holyfield, Massachusetts; The Tecumseh Magical Academy in Alice Springs, Oklahoma.” He paused, and every student knew which school was coming next.

“And the Great Lakes Magical Institute near Seney, Michigan. Great Lakes and Tecumseh were partially destroyed by the explosives, as were many businesses in the three Alleys that were attacked. I also have word that our friend and former schoolmate Harry Potter was badly injured in the attack, but is expected to make a full and speedy recovery. By all accounts he comported himself bravely and nobly, joining the faculty and Aurors in the successful defense of his school. As the school well knows, Harry and I have had our differences in the last year, but no one, least of all me, can question his courage and honor. I salute him.”

He raised his glass of pumpkin juice, keeping one eye peeled onto Neville the entire time, hoping that his performance was being noted by the student Harry was most likely to be in close contact with. And it was, Neville and the others had gone very pale, none more so than Hermione, both with guilt over her freeze out of Harry, and being the one member of the DOM crew to have an idea of what muggle weapons could do. Ron, ironically, was the least affected by the news. He was concerned mind you, but he had long ago decided that nothing could kill Harry short of the planet exploding, and

Dumbledore had not mentioned the roles of Fred and George, presuming that The Daily Prophet would tell all about that in the next issue. Ron tried to buck them up a little.

“He’s all right you guys, you heard Dumbledore, he’ll recover from whatever those werewolves did to him.” Ginny said what they were all thinking.

“What if they bit him?” That was the problem of course. Harry hadn’t been bitten, having suffered only bullet and shrapnel wounds, and Dumbledore should have been informed as such, but he still left it out there as a possibility. He was floating a trial balloon for Draco, deliberately seeing if the students would make the connection of what he didn’t say. As more and more students began speculating on Harry’s injuries, Madam Pomfrey came through the faculty door and bent toward Dumbledore, talking only so that he and Remus and McGonagall, his flankers, could hear:

“Draco Malfoy has awoken.”

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

At roughly the same time, GMT

Pettigrew brought the message in personally to his boss, the letter having arrived via owl post at their mail drop, a drop that was one reason the Aurors outside had not been made sure that someone was there. If Wormtail were to be candid, which he rarely was around here, he would say that he was very pleased with what it contained, but being candid in this house was not always desirable around certain people, if you take the meaning.

“Master, this message just came for you.” Voldemort took it and read it, it was very short.

Dear Tom,

Thanks for the use of your wand, I found it very handy during my confrontation with the Lycans. I think I would go so far as to say that I would not be alive without it. Take that as you will.

Harry

End Chapter

Author's Note: Some of you may have noticed that I use the terms Lycan and werewolf interchangeably, though it's not really the case. The Brits, through canon, use the term werewolf, and I've kept that here. The Americans I have using the term Lycan, and will keep doing so. The only exception is Harry, who has one werewolf friend, and a lot of Lycan enemies, and will use the words interchangeably. Also, a somewhat vague reference to a potential 9/11 scenario is discussed in the chapter, and while it does fit organically into the situation, I want to say emphatically that no disrespect is meant to the tragedy nor am I attempting to trivialize it by including it in a fictional fantasy story. In the timeline of the Harry Potter world of course, 9/11 has not happened.

Saturday, February 15, 1997

Continued

Great Lakes Med Station

6:00 am

"Hello there Harry, my name is Michael Chabon." President Michael Chabon, he didn't need to add. He held out his hand, and Harry shook it, his left side being the injured part of him, wrapped in both magical and muggle bandages, with a healthy dollop of pain killing potion swimming around in Harry's system.

"Pleased to meet you sir."

"Likewise. Joanne tells me that you played quite a large role in today's events."

"I did what I could Mr. President, along with my brothers here." He introduced Fred and George, and the other gang members as well. Chabon smiled at the twins.

"Yes, the joke shop guys, I've heard of you. I was at Salem last week and saw Harry Potter's DIY Howlers all over the place, even Headmaster Shupe had one on his desk." The twins couldn't help but

laugh, as Jessica Murray really loved those particular pranks, and made a point of selling as many as she could, they were well over half her overall sales at this point. Chabon turned to the one gang member he had met before.

“Drew, your father is upstairs, he asked me to have you wait for him here, he’ll be down in a second.” Chabon and Hollie Baylor were close political allies, and Drew had known him for years.

“Yes sir.” Reiko couldn’t stand it anymore, she assumed her parents had not been killed, but wanted something more definitive than an assumption.

“Mr. President, what happened at Tecumseh? My parents teach there.” Chabon had a politician’s gift for remembering names, and instantly recalled hers.

“The Charms teachers? Karl and Lisa?”

“Yes sir.”

“The school was totally destroyed, but your mother and father got out fine, they and the Defense teachers slowed down the Lycans enough so that the students and other faculty could be evacuated. You should be very proud of your parents young lady.” Reiko blushed, but looked at him with pride.

“I always am Mr. President.” She knew she would get the whole story sometime this weekend from them, and was a little surprised that Hill and Burke had been as involved as they were. There was something about those two that she had always found off-putting. Without being asked, Chabon volunteered something else she had been wondering.

“The Tecumseh students will be split between Salem and Pathfinder for the next week, as Tecumseh is rebuilt. The damage here is just too great to do anything but try to keep things as they are. I’m sorry Reiko, for the loss of any personal mementos and things like that that

you may have suffered.” In truth, anything really important to Reiko was up in her room, but she appreciated the thought.

“I’m just glad everyone got out alive sir.” He smiled at her.

“So am I Reiko, so am I. Only three students were lost in the entirety of the eight engagements, and no faculty. We were very lucky.” Harry was mildly surprised that only Great Lakes had lost any students, not realizing that the Lycans had chosen not to fight the students at Salem or Tecumseh, and had not gotten within 100 meters even of the building at Pathfinder.

“How many Aurors were lost sir? How many Lycans?”

“The Lycans lost 55 that we are sure of. That is, that we have bodies as proof, they might have taken some injured back with them, we don’t know. We managed to capture two of them, one at Tecumseh and the one you three managed to get for us. We wound up losing 21 Aurors in total, plus another 10 that are injured.”

“How do 55 Lycans figure in the grand scheme of things?”

“I wish I could tell you Harry, but I don’t really know. No one, probably not even the Lycans themselves, has a true idea of their numbers. Oh I’m sure they know how many troops that they have available, but as for reserves? We estimate that they have roughly 3,000 troops available for some type of combat with The Kindred and us, so what they used was barely more than a probing exercise.” Harry, sensing that Chabon was amenable to answering a few more questions, threw another one out there:

“Were The Kindred involved this morning sir?”

“No, but that was more a function of availability than anything. It’s hard to transport them anywhere quickly, as portkeys make muggles extremely sick and disoriented afterward, not conditions conducive for fighting. Kindred are more like us than many people think, but they’re still muggles as far as portkey and floo travel goes.” Harry had, in fact, not known this, and was about to keep going, when Chabon turned to

the gang, as he had more than a few things to do today and couldn't chat much longer.

"If you kids don't mind, I would like a private word with Harry and his bodyguards. I know he'll tell you the substance of everything probably anyway, but if you don't mind....." The kids took the hint and moved off to see how Ripley was doing, with most of Chabon's entourage walking away as well, leaving only his two Auror bodyguards. As they did, Mitchell Baylor came into the room, and upon spying his son, immediately walked over and enveloped him in a tight hug.

"I'm so glad you're all right Drew."

"I'm glad you are too Dad, you had me worried there." Mitchell had a few scrapes and nicks, but was otherwise fine, if a bit tired. The male Baylors grinned at each other.

Harry and company watched this scene with a smile, it was a nice moment, before turning their attention back to the President.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush here with you, today was a bad day for us. It exposed a lot of holes in our defenses, and every one of them needs to be closed, and I mean soon. I'm going to appoint a small Blue Ribbon commission to deal with that, and I would like you to be the student representative." Harry didn't know what to say here really, so Fred felt free to ask something.

"How small a commission sir?"

"Thirteen people. The Heads of all four schools, one Defense teacher from each school, Head Auror Jacobson and two of his more senior people, a member of Congress, and Harry. I will be an ad-hoc member, and only show up certain meetings. You will have a full vote at the table, and I have no doubt that your practical experience will be highly valued by everyone involved." What else could he say but yes? But he wanted to say yes as well, it would be an interesting series of meetings if nothing else.

"Well of course I'll do it sir, if you think I would be of use."

“I do, and this is no publicity stunt either. Neither the commission itself nor its composition will be made public until its measures are adopted, if even then.”

“Wow, no politics eh?” Chabon smiled ruefully.

“I’m sure you’re having Fudge flashbacks, let me know if you need a bucket to throw up in, I’ll conjure one up.” Even Chabon’s shadows cracked smiles at that one.

“You didn’t like him either?”

“Not especially, nor did he care much for me as it happens. Minister Scrimgeour is due for a conference with myself and Prime Minister Crosby a week from this coming Monday, he’s already informed my office that he wants to visit here the following day, presumably to meet with you. Have you an opinion on that?” Harry was quite interested to talk with Scrimgeour, Biller having built him up during their meeting in January.

“I’m fine with it sir, whenever he wants, as long as I don’t miss any class.”

“Good, I’m sure that you two have a lot to talk about.” Harry quickly decided to send a note to Travis, angling for a preview of what Rufus wanted from him.....and he knew that Rufus would want something.

“When is the first meeting of that commission sir?”

“Tomorrow at noon, don’t bother with a meal beforehand, food will be served. Just come over with Joanne, and Dick probably, Tom doesn’t look like he’ll be up to it quite yet.” Indeed Ripley would be kept under sedation for the rest of the day, and not leave the med station until early Monday morning. Chabon now turned to Fred and George.

“I’ve heard much about these portable swamp pranks you two developed, and how they can be deployed very usefully in urban combat. How quickly can you have 100 of them delivered to us?” Fred and George were rarely stunned into silence.

And this was not one of those rarely times, as they took him quite seriously. Fred started musing out loud.

“Well we have about 50 in stock right now, not counting what got sold today, if any. Hmmmmm.....I think we could have the balance to you in a couple of days if we hump it. George?”

“That sounds about right, we’re ahead on our other stuff, and Dean.....that’s our sister’s boyfriend.....he says he can take on some more tasks for us. Yeah, let’s say Tuesday morning your time just to be safe, since our Saturday right now is later than yours. No need to worry about delivery, we’ll have our house elf do it, he handles all that stuff for us.”

“Sounds good, we’ll have payment waiting for you when the goods arrive, no need for a bulk discount.” George had been about to suggest something along those lines, but still did.

“We were going to knock off 10 percent for the bulk order.”

“That won’t be necessary, your services today were worth it. I’m sure this will be the start of a profitable relationship between our government and your shop.” He shook both of their hands.

“Now I must be off, lots to do, but I wanted to meet you three. I’ll see you tomorrow at noon Harry.”

“Yes Mr. President, and thank you.” The President left, and the Brits stared at each other for a moment. Harry said idly.

“Well that was interesting.”

“Illuminating.”

“Financially rewarding.”

“Yes Harry, we should get ‘Thanks for going to America Harry’ tattooed somewhere where not just Angelina or Alicia can see it.”

“Oh great, I take three bullets for the business. Get me out of this damn bed will you?” They helped him out, and the rest of the gang came back over. Harry briefly explained what Chabon had wanted from him, as the Blood Restoring Potions had taken enough effect that he wasn’t too woozy on his feet.

“You’re going to do it?”

“Are you crazy Warrick? I wouldn’t miss that commission for the world. This is my chance to do something like the League, only where I’ll be more than a token.”

“Good point. So when do we get to see the battle in your pensieve?” They all, save Sophie and maybe Claudia, looked eager to see the replay, and Harry was vaguely disquieted that they seemed so intent on watching him kill Lycans and get shot in the process. This attitude, more than anything, validated his decision to keep them out of it. He sensed an argument in his near future, and for once was not going to shy away from it with them.

“Let’s make sure I can leave here, and then after I get some food, we’ll see the show. I did work up an appetite this morning.” They walked toward the floo, and none of the medical folk seemed inclined to stop him. Harry looked himself over for a moment, the blood had been cleaned off, though the bullet holes remained.

“I can’t believe this, I fought a battle in my pajamas. I would give 1,000 galleons to see the look on Dumbledore’s face when hears that bit of trivia.” All of them started giggling, and Harry mentally resolved not to let Dobby repair the clothing damage, let it be a reminder. None of them had gotten dressed until it was all over, but only Harry was still in his pj’s.

“Well we need to be going back to the shop, so we’ll walk up with you and take our leave, via portkey you know.” Fred said that in a normal tone of voice, for any possible listeners. Harry had spent a couple of minutes racking his brain, trying to think if the three of them had mentioned the trunk at all during the battle, since he knew that at least Murray would want to see the pensieve memory, and likely many more people. They hadn’t talked about the trunk though, at least not in the hallway. Harry tarried a bit, saying that he wanted to talk with Carter about his bandages, and the others waited outside for him.

“What’s up Harry?”

“Dr. Carter, I’m not sure how to put this.....but I’ve been injured quite a bit over the years, both from the muggle cousin, to Voldemort, giant snakes, cursed quills and stuff like that. What I’m asking is, at what point is all of this going to catch up with me? I mean, am I going to be a wreck by the time I’m 30?”

“If you were a muggle Harry, I would say yes, so much trauma to someone so young would have serious long-term effects. You’re not a muggle though, and we heal much better and quicker than they do. The potions I gave you last time, and that Dr. Parrish gave you this time are meant not just for your current injuries, but to make your body stronger for the future.”

“So I needn’t be worried?”

“Well try not to get shot next time if you don’t mind, but no, you need not be worried. Just don’t sleep on your left side tonight and I’ll give you another checkup tomorrow.”

“Thanks Dr. Carter, much appreciated.”

“You’re welcome Harry, take it easy this weekend.” Harry left, but didn’t share the conversation with his friends.

The nine of them flooded up to Lyman’s office, which was empty for the moment. They levitated each other up to the fourth floor one by

one, and streamed into the trunk, Rick and Terry being in the Lounge eating breakfast with most of the other students. Before the twins flooded back, Harry led them aside for a brief coda.

“I need you guys to do something for me back in Diagon Alley. I want you to have a necklace made for me, with a round medallion.”

“Say what?”

“Eh?” Harry ignored their looks, and pulled three objects out of his pocket.

“I already have the material for the medallion.” He had Fred hold out his palm, and Harry dropped the objects into it.

They were the slugs from the three bullets that the Lycan had shot him with. Harry had Summoned them from the floor after Almeida and his associate had retreated.

“Tell the jeweler to try to leave the blood on there somehow. As a token.” Both twins were very moved.

“Sure thing Harry, we’ll do something about it today.”

“Thank you guys, for everything. I do not know what I would do without you two.”

“The feeling is mutual Harry, trust us on that one.” They shared a smile, almost as if telling a quiet joke. The twins said their goodbyes to the rest of the gang, and were off.

Flashback to Riddle Manor:

Voldemort appeared to be about to crumple Harry’s note into a ball, but thought better of it. He looked at his number one lackey.

“Did you read this Wormtail?”

“Yes Master.” Pettigrew cringed slightly, hoping that he wouldn’t be punished for reading it.

Voldemort leaned back in his chair and contemplated, enjoying how nervous Pettigrew looked at this affectation. He had been alerted to the news report on the WWN by one of his people, and had found it to be quite informative. He especially enjoyed the part about the muggle weapons, that would surely turn some people in America and here in Britain toward his views.

“Well Wormtail, are you pleased that our young friend is still alive?”

“ Yes Master, I am.” A bold answer, and one that required clarification.

“Why is that?”

“I want you to be the one to kill him Master. He deserves that honor, he’s a worthy enemy.” That surprised Voldemort some, and he was a man/thing who prided himself on not being surprised.

“Very good Wormtail, you mirror my views precisely. Potter is a worthy enemy, and deserving of our respect. When the time comes, I will finish him quickly, no torture.”

“So you did not find his note to be insulting?”

“Yes I did find it insulting, but I understand where it came from. He was giddy from victory, probably nursing some wounds, and he wanted to brag about it. He is still a teenager, however powerful and resourceful he may be.” Wormtail was quietly very impressed with that reasoning, and how his Lord seemed to understand Potter. Peter Pettigrew knew now more than ever that he was on the right side in all of this. It was a shame that Harry had to die, but it was necessary all the same.

“Is there any news on young Draco?”

“No Master, he is still in a coma, according to our sources.” That would be Theo Nott, who was considered by all to be a hair more observant about such things than Crabbe and Goyle, who were still currently serving detentions.

“Better that he never comes out of it, but no matter. Dismissed Wormtail.”

“Thank you Master.” There would be no reply to the note, that would let the lad think it had gotten under his skin, and Voldemort knew that he could not show weakness in front of the lad. He was going to enjoy the final battle when it came.

Hogwarts Great Hall

At roughly this same time.

“Draco Malfoy has awoken.”

“Thank you Poppy, we will be right there. Please floo The Minister and ask him to send a representative to meet us.” Dumbledore waited a couple of minutes, if only to futilely try to throw off anyone assuming what that was all about, and to give Bones or Scrimgeour time to get there. After that brief time, he motioned for Remus and Flitwick to come with him.

“Keep an eye on certain people Minerva, let me know if any of them go to the Owlery.” McGonagall dearly wanted to go with them, but did not argue the point.

“Of course Albus.”

The three men walked casually out of the room and then picked up the pace toward the Madam Pomfrey's lair. They arrived three minutes later to find a groggy, but conscious Draco Malfoy. Pomfrey also, disquietingly, had her wand in hand, though she had not raised it at the boy/ferret/werewolf. Amos Diggory was the Ministry representative, and he sat quietly, a decent ways out of Draco's reach, with two Aurors stationed in the corner. Dumbledore sat down

next to Draco's bed, and Pomfrey handed the boy a glass of water, which Draco gulped down without thinking about it.

"Hello Draco, welcome back." Malfoy was so tired and out of it that he didn't even think to be rude.

"How long was I out?"

"Three weeks, give or take." That certainly woke him up.

"Three weeks!" That didn't count his captivity with Greyback and company either.

"You had quite a few problems Draco, and they needed to be sorted out."

"Like what? What kind of problems?"

"Let's see if I can recall them all: heroin withdrawal, the muggle virus Hepatitis A, and one other small issue."

"What issue?" The old man chose to wait on that tiny little point.

"How are you feeling right now?"

"I'm tired, and still thirsty." Dumbledore paused to have Pomfrey give him another glass of water, just water in this one.

"How long have you been using heroin Draco?" The tone of voice was so soothing that Draco didn't even think before answering.

"About a year almost, since Easter break last year."

"Who was your supplier?"

"Edward Grant." Dumbledore did not know the name, he only knew Greyback's identity of the werewolves.

“Is he a werewolf?” Draco’s eyes lit up, and they could tell now that he knew he was under Veritaserum, but he couldn’t fight it.

“Yes he is.” Dumbledore or the others never thought to ask if Grant was magical, very sloppy.

“You have been meeting him since Easter of last year?”

“Yes I have.”

“How often do you meet him? How often do you take heroin?”

“Once a month, and three times a week on the average.”

“How did you get started using the drug?”

“He gave it to me to try, said it was the best muggle potion out there. I liked how it made me feel.”

“Were you funneling Grant information about Hogwarts in exchange for your drugs?”

“Sort of, he said he gave me a discount when I had good information.”

“Why did you give him the information?”

“Aunt Bella wrote me and told me to, I probably wouldn’t have otherwise.”

“And that was enough for you to do it?” Draco sounded tired, but all in the room save Dumbledore thought that was a stupid question.

“Of course, she’s family.”

“Why don’t you have a Dark Mark?”

“They didn’t want you to suspect anything.”

“Who is they?”

“Mother and Aunt Bella.” Remus butted in, overriding Dumbledore for a moment. Shepherd would have loved this, though he was being specifically excluded from this talk.

“How did Grant capture you?”

“He stuck something called chloroform in my face, it knocked me out. That’s what he called it anyway.” None of them had ever heard of it, though Shepherd would explain it to them later on.

“What happened to you after you woke up?”

“I don’t know, that’s the last thing I remember.” The four adults stared at each other for a moment. They collectively all doubted that Greyback and his folk would be content to torture an unconscious kid, there wasn’t a lot of fun or sport in that. This meant either Obliviation, or that it was so traumatic that Draco had blocked the whole episode out, there was only so much Veritaserum could do. Remus continued.

“Is Professor Shepherd sympathetic to yours and your family’s views?”

“Not especially.”

“He does not care one way or the other?”

“That’s the feeling I’ve gotten, we haven’t talked specifics.” Remus had thought the same.

“Do you like him?”

“I do, he’s a nice guy.” Again, all three Hogwarts men could agree on that one, though they could never recall Draco calling someone ‘nice’.

“Did you like Snape?” His answer surprised them all.

“Not on a personal level.”

“Did you know of his service to Voldemort?”

“No, he would never talk about it with me. I assumed that he was, but that was just a feeling.”

“Are you aware that he has died?”

“What?!”

“We found his body the same day we realized you were missing, the morning after you were abducted.” Veritaserum did not prevent the person under it from asking questions.

“How did he die?”

“Cruciatu.”

“Who killed him?”

“Your Death Eater friends, and likely Voldemort himself.” Draco was stunned into silence, and Dumbledore decided that the questions should cease for the time being, and the situation explained to him.

“Draco, I am very sorry to be the one to tell you this, but while you were in captivity.....you were bitten by multiple werewolves. You are now a werewolf Draco.” Under Veritaserum, Draco said the first true thing that popped into his mind.

“No I’m not, you’re lying to me.”

“I’m afraid that we aren’t Draco, you have already been through one change.” Draco hesitated for a moment, and what followed sounded a little hollow.

“I can’t be.”

“You are Draco, and I am very sorry.” His mind spinning like crazy, Draco temporized.

“Why? Why are you sorry? You know I hate your guts and everything you stand for.” Dumbledore always had a rather curious reaction to those people who said things like that: kindness.

“Even though your supposed allies have turned on you?”

“They will pay for their crimes, I am still loyal to Lord Voldemort.”

“How loyal will he be now that you are a werewolf?” Draco did not have an immediate answer to that little query, and Dumbledore decided to give him some time to chew on it.

“I can tell that you need some time to sort all of this out in your mind Draco, so we will leave you to it. I should tell you that the student body at large does not know of your new condition, not even Messrs. Crabbe and Goyle.”

“Well don’t tell them now.”

“I won’t Draco, but I cannot allow you to have any visitors for the time being. Think on this, and what you ultimately want for your life.” He walked toward the door, motioning to Diggory, Flitwick, and Remus to follow him. They did, but the pair of Aurors remained. The four men got outside, and Dumbledore turned to Diggory.

“Why is it necessary for the Aurors to be here?” The other man looked at him like he was a simpleton.

“Because you have a Dark Wizard who is now a werewolf as well, living in there. I will not take a risk that he could choose to settle some scores with his new powers.” Remus knew he should take umbrage at that, that just because one was a werewolf, didn’t mean

that he couldn't control himself.....but it was Draco Malfoy though, the most selfish teenager Remus had ever known.

"He doesn't have a wand Albus, but I agree that we can't be too careful." Dumbledore still didn't like it, but was wary of what kind of instructions Diggory may have gotten from Scrimgeour. They walked a short distance down the hallway.

"Filius, what is your take?" Flitwick jumped right in.

"Remove him from Hogwarts immediately Albus. We cannot take any chances with the students under our care. I was willing to go along with things until he admitted selling us out to Greyback, but not anymore."

"Remus?"

"I say give him some more time in isolation to think, and even if he continues to toe the Voldemort line, we can then leak his condition to the Death Eaters, and once he sees how they turn on him.....well I think we will have one more for our side, and a powerful one at that."

"Amos?"

"I agree with Professor Flitwick completely, and I can assure you that The Minister will see it that way as well." Dumbledore still didn't say anything, and Flitwick felt the need to reinforce his position.

"Albus, there's no way you can risk having him here. I know you want to believe that he can change, but even if Remus' scenario plays out, it's just too risky. What if he goes after Hermione Granger or one of the Weasleys, to settle one of a thousand old scores? Or what if he goes after someone a lot less able to defend themselves? And if he does go after Hermione and friends, at what point will Harry sneak back in here and start a killing spree? He might not stop at Draco either." Remus started scoffing, as Dumbledore and Diggory both blanched a little.

“Oh please Filius, I was with you until the Harry comments, but there is no way he would do that. He couldn’t anyway, since we have all of the secret passages sealed up.” Flitwick stared hard back at him, surprising all of them with the intensity of his argument.

“Every battle that boy is in is going to convince him more and more that violence is the best solution to his problems. He just did battle with werewolves using muggle firearms, you think that won’t harden him? And he’ll find a way in if he needs to, Neville or Ginny Weasley will help him if it comes to it.” Dumbledore, while fully in agreement with Flitwick in this narrow area of the debate, nevertheless wanted to shift it back to the problem at hand.

“Enough, both of you. Harry is a concern of course, but not the main concern here. Amos, is The Minister going to order us to remove Draco?”

“He will not issue any pre-emptive orders as of yet. This is still your school, but he will not hesitate to intervene if he feels it necessary.” Well thanks for nothing, thought the Hogwarts people, somewhat bitterly. They, like Harry at roughly the same time, were having Fudge flashbacks, as this was just the kind of thing he would have said.

Though not anymore, as Fudge was now a limited Wizard living the quiet life in Flanders Park, Australia, under the impression that he had suffered a bad case of amnesia.

“Amos, please keep at least two Aurors on guard duty at all times with Draco. Have their rules of engagement be clear: If Draco makes the change, he is to be killed immediately. Otherwise, I agree with Remus, in that we need to give the lad some time to think. No other visitors besides faculty, not even Andromeda Tonks.”

“Why not her? You don’t suspect anything from her do you?”

“We need to play this out in our own manner Remus, if Voldemort and his people find out, it needs to benefit us at the same time. Andromeda is loyal to our cause of course, but a family bond is not easily torn asunder.”

“But she already knows that Draco is a werewolf.”

“No she does not, I Obliviated her myself the night we found out, after making sure that she had not sent a letter to either of her sisters. I will not take any chances here, the stakes are too high for that.” Diggory filed this away to tell Rufus, one more mark against the old man, Obliviating without permission.

“How long are we going to give him to stew?”

“The rest of the day should be sufficient. Remus, please collect his schoolbooks and papers and have them delivered to him, if he is to remain here, he has over a month to make up.” Both Remus and Flitwick nodded, though Flitwick was unhappy with losing the argument.

“What do we tell Professor Shepherd?”

“I will speak to him and explain the situation. The burden of policing Draco, should it come to that, will fall more on him than anyone, but I needed to make sure of his loyalty.” Remus and Flitwick went back to their offices, while Dumbledore and Diggory walked slowly back to his.

“You cannot seriously be thinking of allowing him to remain Albus.”

“There is no harm in seeing if a young man can be taken off the wrong path. He cannot hurt anyone as of now, so a delay costs us nothing. Besides, do you really want him loose out there, if he is as dangerous as you say?”

“I want him in Azkaban Albus, he already admitted to selling us out to Greyback. There is no way you can have a Dark Wizard werewolf in this school.”

“You are missing the whole point here Amos, it is my belief that Draco will no longer be Dark, once he faces the facts of his situation.”

“Or he could go rogue, he has the money to do so now.”

“He is not aware of that yet, that he has inherited money and a house from Severus. That will not factor into his decision.” Diggory just shook his head, and said nothing for the rest of their walk. He flooed back to The Ministry, and Dumbledore waited for the other shoe to drop. It didn’t happen right then though, as unbeknownst to him, Rufus was busy and couldn’t do any interfering. Besides, The Minister agreed that they should at least see how Draco would react to his changed circumstances. McGonagall reported back to him that none of the DOM crew had gone to the Owlery, they had in fact gone about their regular Saturday business. The DOM’s had agreed among themselves at lunch that they should just wait for Harry to contact one of them, he would certainly write Neville, wouldn’t he?

On their own, Luna and Neville sent a quick note off to the twins, letting Harry know that they were thinking of him. Ginny and Hermione did not think to do this, and Ron wouldn’t have anyway. This widened the chasm between the DOM kids as far as Harry went, the lines being drawn ever so wider. Harry still had a lot of sisterly affection for Ginny, and respected Hermione at the very least, but they were doing themselves no favors.

The Burrow

1:00 pm

Molly had heard the report on the WWN, and had immediately screamed out for Arthur to come listen to it, he had been outside puttering around in his shed. After a considerable effort in calming her down, he agreed that he would take a trip overseas the next day to make sure that Harry was okay, it would take a long day of portkey travel, but he privately thought it was worth it, if only to keep Molly from having a heart attack. That plan did not come to pass however, as they received a visit from their twins. Fred and George tumbled through the floo:

“Hello Mum, Dad.” Molly walked up and hugged them tightly, still not knowing that they had been involved in the melee.

“Did you hear the news on the wireless? Will you have Dobby come give you a report on how Harry’s doing?”

“No need Mum, we were there.” That got Molly quiet right away, and Arthur reacted:

“You were what?”

“We were there Dad, for most of it anyway. Dobby came to get us when the explosions started in.” Molly had still lost the power of speech.

“Well you two are clearly none the worse for wear. How injured was Harry? All the wireless report will say is that he got hurt.”

“He was shot in the shoulder, but he’s already out of the Hospital Wing. That was while I was wearing the vest, earlier he was wearing it and took a burst to the chest, but the bullets just bounced off.” Molly walked unsteadily over to a chair and sat down.

“What vest?”

“Remember the piece of dragon hide that Charlie gave him for Christmas?”

“All too well, Ron had a fit later that night about it, he wanted it.”

“Don’t tempt us to fire him again Dad. Anyway, Harry had Dobby go hunting for another piece on the black market, and then he sewed a vest together from the two pieces.”

“And it stops bullets?”

“I’m alive and talking to you because of it.”

“YOU GOT SHOT TOO!” Molly’s face was a much deeper shade of red than her hair, but she clearly had recovered her voice.

“Easy Mum, clearly I’m okay. I took a burst to the back, but they just bounced off.”

“How did you even get over there in the first place?”

“I can’t say Dad, we have to keep it quiet.” Arthur wanted to be annoyed with them for that, but was just so relieved that they weren’t hurt that couldn’t bring himself to yell at them. Both he and Molly were having thoughts of Percy right about now.

“Why is it that you two clam up when it comes to Harry?” Because our beyond paranoid baby brother demands it of us, that’s why. Things that we think and do not say.

“Force of habit, but it’s going to stay that way for now. We just came by to let you know that everything is all right over there.” Molly had calmed down, having looked her sons over and not seeing so much as a scratch on either of them.

“You fought against werewolves with muggle weapons. I just don’t know what to say.” The twins’ reservoir of humor had its limits, and George was moved to reply:

“I don’t know Mum, you could say that you’re proud of us, or words to that effect.” Molly flushed, and Arthur kept his blank expression, letting his wife dig herself out. This didn’t happen often, but the twins did occasionally get their backs up about not being taken seriously.

“Of course I’m proud of you, I’m always proud of what you two have accomplished. It’s just hard to get used to the idea of my children risking their lives so much.” The twins could understand that.

“Well, Junior needed us, though it was Dobby who came and got us. We’re a good team, the three of us.” Arthur moved over and put his arms around them.

“Harry’s lucky to have you two.” Fred just waved that off.

“That’s what he says, but it goes both ways. We just met the American Wizard President, who just gave us a large order for our swamps.” The twins described how they and Harry had used them in the battle, and how Chabon had been much impressed. The Weasleys did not have a pensieve, so the twins had to verbally demonstrate how the battle had gone. Arthur just shook his head at the end and smiled.

“I know I shouldn’t laugh, but you go over there, risk your lives, kill some more werewolves, and wind up in a business deal with the American government. My goodness.”

“All part of a day’s work Dad. Anyway, we need to get back to the shop, we have 50 plus swamps to manufacture and only three days to do it in. Let Bill know that everything is all right okay? We’ll write to Charlie ourselves later on tonight when we take a break.”

“And Ron and Ginny?” George rolled his eyes.

“To hell with Ron, and Ginny will probably get a note via Dobby some time today.” Little did they know. They hugged their parents goodbye, and were off before Molly had a chance to get some food into them.

“Do I still need to go over there?”

“No, Harry’s okay, for now. That boy, everything always seems to happen to him doesn’t it?” Yes it did, thought Arthur, but he owed his life to Harry and wasn’t about to start complaining.

“Tell you what, we’ll plan a trip over there for the first Quidditch game in May. Fred, George, and Harry on the Pitch together again. That will be a sight to see.” It was a foregone conclusion among all of them that the twins would shoehorn their way on to the team, and Harry had already spoken to Geyser about it, and he was fully onboard if the twins were sorted in Cortez.....not that they had to worry about a Sorting anymore.

“Yes it will, that’s a great idea Arthur. And we’ll go over for the twins’ graduation as well, see this school we’ve been hearing so much about.” After a floo call to Bill and a long letter jointly written to Charlie, the two elder Weasleys went back about their normal routines.

Around 10:00 pm that night, Dumbledore collected his senior staff members, plus Shepherd and walked down to the Hospital Wing, whose only occupant at this time was Draco. His Auror minders were still there, though they did not say much. One of them got to his feet when Dumbledore’s group came in, and immediately went to the floo to alert The Ministry. Within a minute, Diggory and Bones both arrived. Dumbledore took a seat next to Draco again, the lad was looking a bit healthier than he was 10 hours previously, and his customary sneer was absent.

“How are you feeling Draco?”

“Better.”

“You have had some time to think about your situation, and I was wondering if you would like to talk about it now.”

“I would, but not to all of this crowd. I want you, Lupin, and one other person here, the rest can see it through a pensieve, or get one of those Weasley Ear things.”

“Who is the other person?”

“Granger.” Diggory blurted out.

“Hermione Granger?”

“Is there another Granger in this school?” There was only quiet contempt from Draco, again with no sneer. Dumbledore did not bother to conceal a small smile, but had to ask anyway:

“Why Miss Granger?”

“I want to know some things, things that only she can tell me. Look, I’m not going to try anything, you and Lupin can have your wands at my temples the whole time for all I care. I know I can’t fight my way out of this place, even if I wanted to.” Dumbledore couldn’t see the harm, and turned to McGonagall.

“Minerva, please retrieve Miss Granger, I believe she and Mr. Weasley are still in the library. He is not to come, no matter how insistent he becomes in the matter.”

“Yes Professor Dumbledore.” She quickly departed, and Draco stared tiredly at the others there.

“I heard Pomfrey talking about Potter being shot, what’s that all about?” Dumbledore, despite the baleful stares of Diggory, Bones, and even Remus, told him the short version. Draco startled them all by chuckling.

“He’s got guts Potter, I can’t take that away from him. Every time he acts as a proper Slytherin, he goes and screws it up by playing the Gryffindor hero. That guy, it’s almost like he’s at war with himself.” Remus needed all his self control to keep a look of respect from flashing across his face. There was silence for a couple of minutes, and then Remus was moved to ask a question.

“I’m curious about something Draco, at your father’s trial, Harry said that he didn’t hate you. Can you say the same?”

“Most of the time, though there are instances. It’s all about upbringing you know, if Potter had lived my life, he would have turned out much like I did. We’re not as different deep down as people think.”

“That’s what Harry always said himself about you and him.” All heads turned to the speaker of that: Hermione. Draco managed a smirk.

“Evening Granger.” Hermione looked confused at being there, but kept her tone politely neutral.

“Draco.” At Dumbledore’s nod, the others left the room, even the Auror guards, figuring that Dumbledore and Lupin could handle things well enough. The four of them looked at each for a moment, and Draco began.

“Granger, I would like you to swear a Wizard’s Oath that you will not repeat word one of anything said during this conversation, without permission from me or these two. It will be worth your while to swear it, if that helps the decision.” Hermione had rarely looked more at a loss, as she turned to Dumbledore and Remus.

“What the heck is going on here?”

“Please swear the Oath Miss Granger.”

“Draco’s right Hermione, it will be worth it.” She still looked dubious, but went along with it.

“Fine. I swear a Wizard’s Oath that the contents of this conversation will stay between the four of us until one of you says otherwise.”

“Good enough. Granger, I was kidnapped by werewolves and bitten, I am now a younger version of Lupin here.” He said it matter of factly, and without preamble, simply to see the look on her face. It worked, as she opened and closed her mouth several times before managing to blurt out a response.

“You cannot be serious.” Draco looking wistful was a new visual experience for the other three.

“I would give anything if I wasn’t Granger, but it’s the truth.”

“Why are you telling me this? Me, the Mudblood?”

“Because of all of your crowd here, you’re the one I could count on for an honest reaction, for honest opinions. The two Weasleys are an idiot and a overly hot tempered girl, respectively, Lovegood cannot be

taken seriously, and Longbottom.....well I've done too much to him over the past six years. You may be a Mudblood, but you're a smart one, and that's the kind of input I need right now." Hermione had no idea how to react this, but one look at her old foe's face got a reaction out of her.

"Why on earth would I help you?"

"To get me to defect Granger, I'm worth more to you on your side than I am on the other three sides."

"Three sides? There are four sides to this?"

"The Light side: The Death Eater side: The werewolf side: and the dead side. The last option is not too enticing for me, even in my new state." Dumbledore intervened before Hermione started getting a headache.

"So you are intending to join us then Draco?"

"Probably, if you meet my terms, it would seem to be the best thing for me. But first I want to know something from Granger." Hermione's curiosity had won out here, but she still wanted to make one tiny point.

"My name is Hermione."

"Yes it is. Now what I want to know is this: What is it about Potter that makes him so special to you people? I get that he has loads of power and a mystique, but what is that something that makes you people follow him?" Hermione was quiet for a moment, and Remus mentally patted himself on the back, he had figured that Harry was the reason Hermione was here right now. Dumbledore, very wisely, kept very silent.

"You said it yourself Draco, he has a mystique about him. That's why the others follow him, because they know that something interesting is always going to happen when Harry is around, and because he is so decisive when he acts."

“And yourself?”

“Because he has always been there for me, he cared about me when no one else here would. I owe him more than I could ever repay.”

“Yet he left.”

“Because of difficulties with the Headmaster here.” Even Hermione didn’t totally believe that, and Draco was gracious enough not to call her on it.

“Don’t worry Dumbledore, finding those out are not part of the deal you and I are going to strike. So, Hermione, you would trust Potter with your life?” Extra emphasis on her first name.

“I already have, many times.”

“That’s not what I asked you, things have changed since he decamped.”

“No they haven’t Draco, you saw him fight at the trial.”

“Yes I did, very impressive. Rumor has it that he stopped Lord Voldemort from killing you.” Hermione had heard those rumors, and would have dearly loved to have killed whoever spread them.....except for the tiny, insignificant detail that she thought it was Ron who had done so.

“He did.”

“And would you have done the same for him?”

“Where is this going Draco? Why are we talking about someone who is thousands of kilometers away?”

“Humor me Hermione.” No snotty emphasis this time.

“Oh all right, yes of course I would have done the same.”

“The reason I’m asking this, is if I switch sides here, I, along with everyone else in this room, have to rely on Potter to deal with Lord Voldemort. I just want to know if the guy is up to it.”

“He is Draco, he beat him at the trial did he not?”

“Yes he did, and that’s the only reason I have not braved Auror fire and tried to escape yet.” Hermione cracked her first smile at that.

“You have clearly been doing some planning over these last 10 hours Draco.”

“Yes I have Dumbledore, sorry, Headmaster sir.” More sarcasm, as Draco was warming up to the task at hand.

“Are you afraid of Harry?”

“Yes I am Hermione, and so are you. I know that Potter and your boyfriend are on the outs, which is why your loyalty to Potter is so intriguing. You think I didn’t keep at least half an eye peeled on you people this whole time? Weasley is stupid enough to provoke Potter and we both know it. Potter dislikes me for sure, but I’ve never turned on him the way your boyfriend has, twice now.” Nobody knew this better than Hermione, who was getting rather tired of people reminding her of it.

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You just said a lot right there. Do you believe that Potter has what it takes to kill Lord Voldemort?”

“Yes I do Draco. I’m betting my life on it aren’t I?” Malfoy nodded at her, and turned to Dumbledore.

“Dumbledore, get Bones in here, we have a deal to strike. You can stay Hermione, but your Oath is still in play.” Bones had indeed been listening, and came over before the old man could fetch her.

“Yes Draco?”

“I have some demands, and if they are met, I will swear whatever Oaths you feel are necessary to feel comfortable. I recognize that you lot are my best option to stay alive, and am willing to deal under that reality.” Bones kept her face professional, but inside was more than a tad giddy, this was a coup beyond coups.

“And your demands are?”

“I am assuming that you have the authority to deal here, right?”

“Correct, Minister Scrimgeour has authorized me to make any reasonable agreements necessary to close this chapter.” Draco certainly hoped so, if he was mildly afraid of any adult on the Light side, it was Rufus Scrimgeour.

“Number one: Immunity from past crimes, complete immunity. I will give you a total list under Veritaserum if you want, as I’m sure you will, but know ahead of time that there are no murders or rapes or anything of that nature.”

“Accepted. Next?”

“It should go without saying that I want a full dose of Wolfsbane when the full moon comes, but I’m saying it anyway.”

“Accepted, Professor Shepherd has already been given instructions as such.”

“I want written Wizard Oaths from Hermione Granger here, Neville Longbottom, every Weasley that I’ve ever gone to school with, and Harry Potter, that they will never seek revenge on me for past crimes, as long as I hold up my end of the deal here and do not commit new

crimes against them or their side.” Bones didn’t have the authority to accept that, and all eyes turned to Hermione.

“I will do so, but I don’t speak for any of the others. I will try with Ron, Ginny and Neville, but I will not guarantee success.” Dumbledore looked at Remus, he had caught the significance of “every Weasley that I’ve ever gone to school with’.

“Remus, will you speak to Fred and George? If they agree, I have no doubt that they can convince Harry.”

“I’ll give it a shot. Draco, how much can I tell them of the story?”

“As much as you need to get it done, I’ve heard of how tight those three are, the troublemakers should be able to sway Potter. If not, then get him over here and I’ll talk to him myself.” Hermione surprised them all by laughing.

“He’s not going to move one meter because you want him to Draco, and I’ve heard him say more than once that he’ll never set foot in this castle ever again.”

“He will for this. Just because Potter’s checked out for the time being, doesn’t mean that he isn’t interested in the war. All he’s doing over there is getting stronger, I’m only surprised he didn’t do it a year or two ago. That said, if all the other people swear and Potter doesn’t, I’ll still go along with the deal as long as I have your collective words that you made your best efforts to talk him into it.” Remus looked him straight in the eye.

“You have my word on that, I’ll do what I can to convince him. I don’t think it will be as hard as you might think, Harry is above all else, a pragmatist.” All of them, however, were wondering what concession or concessions that Harry would gleefully extract from them in exchange for said Oath. The pragmatist in Harry would appreciate that part of it as well.

“Fair enough.”

“Anything else?”

“One more tiny little thing, rather insignificant really.”

“Why do I sense a whopper?”

“You have wisdom beyond your meager years Madam Bones. I want the Malfoy money. All of it.”

“The money in your family vault?”

“Every last Sickle and Knut, and Malfoy Manor as well, along with everything in it. I’m the only one in my generation, and it would have gone to me anyway.....before my little problem. My parents, who have to assume that something like this might have happened, are probably going to disinherit me and find some distant cousin to give it all to, and I will not allow that to happen. I don’t care what Wizengamot strings you need to pull to seize the vault and Manor, but you do it.”

The Wizengamot had had bills like this come up before, the seizure of property and money of those convicted of being traitors to the government, which is technically what all Death Eaters had been labeled as. They had always been voted down however, a combination of closet Dark supporters, Fudge loyalists who followed his reluctance, and even some Dumbledore people who worried about a bad precedent being set, in case of a duly elected Dark government, which was not out of the realm of possibility. Bones looked at him.

“ Malfoy Manor will be relatively easy, as your mother has abandoned it. The vault however.....”

“Then no deal.” Her mind already going over plans, she temporized:

“Let’s say, for a minute, that we accomplish this. What do we get in return?”

“I will officially join The Order of the Phoenix and fight under Dumbledore’s and eventually Potter’s orders. I will NOT be a spy for you ala Snape, but I would be willing to stay undercover inside school if you wish, to manipulate Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, and all the others here. I know every one of their strengths, every one of their weaknesses, and it would be my pleasure to use them all to serve your cause. Our cause.”

“Interesting.”

“And I would further pledge an investment of one million galleons to help rebuild Hogsmeade once this is over. Not a loan or a gift, an investment.” That was roughly 15 percent of the Malfoy fortune, and raised some eyebrows. Remus looked at the other two adults.

“Let’s go over to the corner and speak for a moment shall we? Hermione, you and Draco can get along for a moment can’t you?”

“Oh certainly.” Some Hermione sarcasm, as Remus, Bones, and Dumbledore walked over to the other side, wands all in their hands, just in case Draco was running a drag on them. Remus looked at his companions.

“I don’t see how we don’t take this deal. He’s not asking for much in the grand scheme of things, and it will go a long way to helping us win.” Bones:

“He’s one boy, still a few weeks from his majority. Are you really saying that he has Potter worth to him?” She would have made such a deal with Harry in a heartbeat, but felt the need to play devil’s advocate in this case.

“I’m saying that of the Death Eaters, only Voldemort and Bellatrix Lestrange have his level of power, and he could outdo his aunt before too long. Is he Harry worthy? No, but a lot of that is only because of experience. Harry has more battle experience of any teenager since Alexander the Great, that’s the difference.” There are lot of muggle teenagers caught up in various civil wars around the globe that would

take issue with that statement, but Remus was probably speaking metaphorically.

“And just how do we deliver that vault to him?” Remus responded by walking over to Draco.

“Draco, I want to be clear on something. Are you demanding your parents’ vault, or merely the contents of it?” Draco’s smile turned crafty.

“Why Professor Lupin, are we contemplating a criminal enterprise? How Slytherin of you, almost Potter-esque, he would have mobilized half the Gryffindors and invaded Gringotts by now. Your answer is the second one, the contents.”

“Thank you.” Remus walked back over and told them.

“All it takes is someone in Polyjuice with that key.” Bones looked at him like he was crazy.

“A heist?”

“If you have a better idea, I’m all ears.” Bones looked conflicted.

“ Sadly enough I don’t. Albus, some input here would be appropriate.”

“Remus, are you not troubled that we would be seen as bribing Draco for his support?”

“No, because the money is rightfully his, or at least it will be. If Amelia gives Draco that immunity, then technically speaking he has a clean slate. More than his mother and father can say. We can’t let this go to The Wizengamot, you and I both know that the trial traitors were not the only Dark members of it. Even if the bill passes, as I think it would, then they would have a legion of owls sent to Narcissa, warning her. A heist is our only option here, unless The Ministry

wants to pay Draco now and hope to get the money from Narcissa and Lucius themselves?”

“That is an option, but not an especially viable one under the circumstances. Let’s go back over there.” They walked back to the bed, and found that the two kids had been talking about what Draco had missed in the classes they shared, the chill a bit less than their previous history would indicate.

“Draco, if you sent a letter to your mother right now asking her to meet you, how would she respond?”

“She wouldn’t be responding Madam Bones, and you well know it, Lord Voldemort would be doing the talking, she would simply be taking dictation.” Hermione covered her mouth, hiding a smile.

“You know what I’m asking Draco.”

“Would she meet with me? They have to assume that I’ve been under Veritaserum at the very least. You need the key I take it?”

“No plan will work without it, seizing it through official channels is unlikely to work.” Hermione’s jaw dropped open.

“Oh my God.”

“Sorry Hermione, but 8,000,000 galleons is 8,000,000 galleons, and I have my own future to think about. A future as a werewolf with the third largest price on my head in the Death Eater world, behind only Potter and Dumbledore. Not an ideal combination really.” It was 7.5 million after the ransom, but none of them knew that. Hermione rounded on the one person in the conversation that she assumed to be an idealist.

“You’re going to tell me then that the end justifies the means, Headmaster?”

“We are at war Miss Granger, a war that we are barely winning, if that. I will leave no straw ungrasped in order to prevail. Draco, do you have any suggestions on how to get the key?” He certainly did.

“Use Aunt Andromeda as bait. Mother will not let that key leave her person, she knows that Lord Voldemort could order her and Father killed at any moment. She would need that money in order to escape if she got half a minute’s warning.”

“A letter from your aunt to your mother, asking for a meeting?”

“Yes, to update Mother on my situation. A letter portkey is too obvious, but a meeting portkey is just the ticket.”

“How loyal is your mother to the cause?” Draco smiled at the question.

“She can spell the word ‘loyalty’ Professor Lupin, but that’s the extent of her familiarity with the term. Get her in here, and I’ll take it the rest of the way. If by some mischance I can’t, then your heist idea will carry the day.”

“You’re really warming to this, aren’t you Draco?”

“It certainly beats terrorizing first year Gryffindors as entertainment. Oh yeah, that reminds me, one more demand: If things get too hot for me in Slytherin, I want you to re-sort me into Ravenclaw. I’m not interested in going to sleep every night wondering if I’m going to wake up or not the next morning.” Everyone looked at Dumbledore.

“Agreed.”

“Excellent, now if someone will get going on Aunt Andromeda.....who does not know that I’m a werewolf, correct?”

“Correct.”

“I have no doubt that she’s terrified of Mother, but she’ll meet with her if you ask it.”

“How are you so sure of this? She says that you two had not even met recently.”

“I’m a student of human nature Headmaster, don’t let the blonde hair and the sneer fool you. A true Slytherin always watches more than he talks. If you weren’t such a Hufflepuff you would understand this. Now if you will go retrieve my aunt.” Hermione couldn’t hide the giggle this time, though she managed to stop it after half a second.

Dumbledore gave a small sigh, and walked over to the floo.

“Andromeda Tonks!”

“Yes Headmaster? Is this about Draco?”

“Draco has awoken Andromeda, we need you over here right now please.”

“Of course, just give me a moment.” She disappeared for a moment, and Dumbledore turned back to young Malfoy.

“We have your leave to tell her the entire story?”

“Do what you must Headmaster, but keep your Obliviation skills at the front of your mind.” A shot in the dark really, but the old man smiled inside.

Andromeda Tonks arrived within a couple of minutes, and the situation was explained to her. She, as Draco had forecasted, seemed scared of the prospect, but went along with the deal anyway. She wrote the letter in front of them, requesting the meeting. She told her sister that she wanted to update her in person, that there were several muggle viruses that might be a problem without the proper potions, which would cost money. At the end, she added a postscript:

Three united against all.

She explained that that was a saying that she, Bella, and Narcissa would always tell each other when one of them was in trouble. It had not applied to her marriage to Ted Tonks of course, as they had forsaken her officially, but in all the years since, neither Bellatrix Lestrange nor Narcissa Malfoy had ever once attempted to harm muggleborn Ted Tonks, and it was understood that neither of their husbands or associates would do so as well. This unspoken arrangement had held for over 20 years, and if Voldemort had ever commented on it, no one was talking. Only Nymphadora, their talented only child, had ever taken Death Eater fire, and that was solely because she was an Auror, a choice.

The postscript would prove that she was not under any undue influence, and would help persuade her sister. The letter was taken away to the Owlery, where Nicosia, the fastest owl in the place, was taken down and used to send the letter. A reply did not come until morning.

Flashback to Harry's trunk:

10:00 am

The replay of the battle had just finished in the pensieve, and all the gang were quiet and contemplative. None of them had cheered during any of it, and all had gasped both times Harry was shot, and when Fred took his burst in the back. Harry, remembering their eagerness before, couldn't resist a dig when it was all over.

"So was it all that you hoped for? Exciting enough?" Jonas and Drew looked somewhat ashamed, while Reiko and Warrick didn't say anything either. Sophie looked at him.

"Were you scared at all?" Harry really didn't want to go there, but he answered her truthfully.

"No I wasn't, and yes, I find that somewhat strange now that I think about it."

“Why didn’t you use any more of that Tergum Fundo spell? Or stuff like that? I know how hard you’ve been studying those kinds of curses.”

“The situation didn’t warrant it. Dark Magic should only be used when you have no other choice, and I didn’t need to use them until the very end.” Meaning his one time use of Avada Kedavra. Reiko blurted out.

“That’s it? Just a question of morality?” Her surprise really made him angry, but he kept it inside.

“Yes, a morals lesson from someone whose kill total is now approaching double figures overall, imagine that.” She looked embarrassed at his quiet response.

“I didn’t mean it like that Harry.” Uh huh, he thought, not liking this at all.

“Ask your parents what spells they used Reiko, and what spells they would have been willing to use to protect the students under their care.”

“I wasn’t trying to insult you.”

“Well you did.” Now Warrick got into it.

“Hey, don’t go after her dude, just because you’re in a bad mood.”

“None of you are in this trunk under coercion you know.” Warrick likely would have wanted to smack anyone but the guys in this room for saying that, but wasn’t unmindful that Harry had been through a trauma or two in the last few hours.

“Easy there dude, I know you’ve had a rough day.”

“Being shot will do that for you.”

“You didn’t go out there under coercion either.” Harry would have started laughing if it wouldn’t have hurt him so much.

“Bullshit Warrick, and you know it. If I had stayed in that Lounge I never would have heard the end of it back in Britain, and people would have been whispering here too. I would have gone out anyway, since that’s my nature.....but to say that I wasn’t coerced, I mean c’mon. You still appear to have no idea of the scrutiny I live my life under, even over here. Every breath I take, every move I make, I’m watched, just like the song says. The only place I can truly let my guard down is right here in this trunk, and in front of you six, plus the twins and Dobby and Winky.” Warrick had never thought of it like that, he knew that Harry was under some pressure because of his past and assumed power level, but Harry’s view hadn’t really registered until now.

“Point taken, and I apologize.” Harry sighed.

“Me too mate, and to you too Reiko. I can’t remember the last time I was this touchy, when Dumbledore wasn’t involved anyway. I should not have jumped on you like that, especially since your parents risked just as much as I did.” Reiko squeezed his good shoulder.

“Easy there, I can’t afford to have that one kink out on me.” A slap to the back of his head ensued.

“You’re not injured back there are you?”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“Wishing is very healthy most of the time.”

“Where’s a fountain when I need one. But I did hit my head when the first bullets hit me you know, it still hurts.” Just then, Dobby popped in, interrupting Harry’s guilt trip of Reiko.

“Reiko, your mother is upstairs in the Lounge, she is asking for you.” Reiko could move quite quickly when the spirit moved her, and she

was halfway up the ladder before Dobby finished his sentence. He popped back up there to let Lisa Aylesworth know, and the rest of the gang soon followed. Harry paused to get dressed, or at least put some pants on. The others were ahead, and he wasn't sure how he was going to put a shirt on over his bandages. He somehow got up to the ladder and to the Lounge and saw that little had happened beyond Reiko trying to squeeze her mother to death. The others were crowded around as well, saying how glad they were that Lisa and Karl were all right.

"I'm fine, we both are. No one at Tecumseh was hurt, even the falling debris didn't injure anyone."

"All your stuff though, President Chabon said that nothing was saved."

"We'll be fine Reiko, we had all our valuables locked away in our bank vault. Even the pictures we had were all copies."

"You planned for this?" Lisa smiled.

"No, we just always feared some light fingered students. Not any of you of course." Sophie and Claudia hadn't thought so anyway, so it was easy for them to laugh, and Reiko was curious as to why she hadn't noticed this before. Lisa disengaged from Reiko and looked over at Harry.

"So the rumors were true, why am I not surprised?"

"It was a hell of an alarm clock."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm okay now, just a little sore and inconvenienced is all, I never fully appreciated my left arm until now. Where are you and Karl set up?"

“We’re at Salem for the next week or so. Those of us there will teach a double helping of our classes to the students housed there, our colleagues and Pathfinder will do the same.”

“Dad’s okay?” Lisa had said this already, but recognized that this had been a worrisome time for her only child. She was amazed Reiko had held up as well as she had, with both parents and one of her best friends dodging bullets in the two melees.

“We’re all fine honey, everyone got out without a scratch.”

“The President told us that you and the Defense guys held them off?”

“Well we didn’t exactly hold them off, we just slowed them down a few minutes. I talked with Clary, he’s with us at Salem, and he said that five minutes less and there would have been some fatalities.”

“Did Burke and Hill really help you guys, I mean they always seem so.....so.....”

“Don’t finish that Reiko, but I know what you mean. Henry and Jimmy are not the most dedicated professionals, but they do know what they’re doing when the spirit moves them to share it.” Besides, Clary was afraid of them, something she chose not to mention. It was one of her occasional daydreams of the last couple of months to have Harry duel Burke and Hill, not to the death of course, but enough to humiliate the two of them sufficiently. Maybe when Harry was healed up from his latest injuries.....She put that thought away again as Reiko addressed her.

“Can you stay awhile?”

“Just for a bit honey, I wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“Harry wouldn’t let me fight.” Lisa turned to Harry and gave him a sincere:

“Thank you Harry.”

“She exaggerates, the only one Winky would have stopped was Sophie.” Said girlfriend smacked Harry’s good arm.

“Oh, so Reiko and Warrick could make up their own minds, but I couldn’t?” Well yeah, but Harry hadn’t survived this morning only to be killed now.

“You three were needed in here more than out there. More people would not have helped us do what we needed to do.”

“Hindsight.”

“I’ll take whatever sight I can get thank you very much. Lisa, you want to come down to the trunk with us?”

“Sure, I’d love to get a look at it, Karl is always talking about us getting one.” She knew he would be especially insistent about it after all this mess, the day they had gone to the island they hadn’t really looked around inside the trunk too much. They walked back to the room, making sure that Lisa was holding on to someone as they passed through the doorway, no Pink was wanted now of all times. All the room doors had been Pinked, and then had it removed by Reiko and Sophie, even their own. They knew that some of the younger kids might be sloppy about it if it remained.

They repaired to the trunk, and Lisa was prevailed upon to show a pensieve memory of her experience. She walked away while it was playing, not being interested in reliving it, and she perused Harry’s library for awhile. None of Harry’s books had been lost in the explosion, but she quickly saw another half dozen that she would ask to borrow, though some of the other titles appalled her. She had done a little digging on the Blacks since gaining access to their library, and what she had found out was very troublesome, though she wasn’t worried at all about Harry being so close to her daughter. The memory ended, and Harry wandered in to see what she was doing, as the others were talking about what they’d seen.

“Looks like you had just as much fun as I did today.”

“I meant what I said earlier Harry, thank you for not taking her with you.”

“I would never let any harm come to her Lisa.”

“You made sure of that. Are your twins all right?”

“They’re fine, Fred got shot, but he was wearing my vest.”

“That dragon-hide thing Reiko wrote us about?”

“Right in one, it absorbed three bullets on Fred and seven on me without flinching. I doubt I would have gone out there alone without wearing it.” He gave a brief description to her about how Fred had come to be wearing it.

“Oh, Steve Atwood made a point of telling me that he saved all his WWW products and the money he collected. He’s with us at Salem.”

“Well I wasn’t worried about the pranks, but please tell him that I’m glad he’s okay.”

“I will, that guy’s a born salesman.”

“I know, his sales will probably eclipse mine before the school year is out.”

“Reiko says you don’t try as hard as he does though.”

“I do in my own way.” The others came in, and Lisa had to take her leave and get back to her students.

“Your father sends his love, and he’ll try to come by during the week if he can, at night after classes and such are done.”

“Great, I can’t wait to see him. Good luck over there.”

“It’ll be fine, we went to school with one of the Charms teachers, so we can catch up on old times. I love you honey, be good.” She hugged Reiko, and got a collective group hug from the others, even Drew, whom she had just met. The gang then split up for awhile, to get some nap time in for most of them, though Harry and Sophie went back down into the trunk.

“I should pound you for the chances you took today.....but I can’t.”

“Why not? Not that I’m complaining mind you.”

“Because, like you told Warrick, it’s in your nature. I’m not going to be one of those women who constantly bitches about her man going out and doing dangerous things. That’s too cliché if you ask me.”

“That’s a relief hearing that, I wasn’t sure what you were going to do once the witnesses left.”

“I know, and that would have been cliché too. I remember once that you told Hermione that she should have known what she was signing on for when she chose Ron. Well I didn’t know ahead of time.....but I’ve accepted it. I’ve accepted that you’re not going to hide from conflict anymore.” Harry’s blood pressure now went back down to normal.

“Thank goodness, and you still understand why I wouldn’t let you out there?”

“I do, but why didn’t you include Warrick and Reiko in that? Winky could have stopped us all.”

“A little psychological ploy that I came up with while I was putting my vest on. I figured that they wouldn’t leave you behind.” She chuckled a little at that.

“Good thinking, and quick thinking.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time, and it did work.”

“You didn’t do the same for Drew, Claudia, and Jonas?”

“No I didn’t, those three are a lot more cautious.”

“Are you going to be in trouble with Murray for the twins coming over? Did the portkey story work?”

“Well technically I never said how they got here, Dobby said that she just assumed they used a portkey. She won’t complain though, and the twins get to be in Cortez, that’s going to be so great.”

“Are you going to try and kick out Rick and Terry?”

“No, there’s an extra room for the Seniors, I’m going to see if Warrick and I can move in there with them, at least for the last part of the semester. I’ll put the trunk in there at any rate, so Gred and Forge can easily get to and from the shop.” Sophie then surprised him by kissing him, and Harry discovered that he was not quite so tired, his blood pressure now going back up, in a good way. Things went quiet for awhile, talking-wise, and they got their naps in later.

At 5:00 pm, right before dinner was served in the four Lounges, Murray took a slight risk and had everyone assemble outside, on the undamaged side of the school. Not only were students and faculty present, but the house elf staff was there as well. The students were huddled in their coats and Warming Charms, as Murray put Sonorus on her throat.

“We gather here to remember three brave young men, who died in defense of our school and their friends and classmates. Ross Karver was a Junior year Proctor student from Duluth, Minnesota. He was active in the Arithmancy club, and had hopes of teaching that subject someday. His mother Janine raised him very well, and he was a talented Wizard, a model for us all. He died with his wand raised, ready to defend his Housemates from whatever was out there in that hallway, he died a hero.

“Arthur Hailey and Ryan Chappelle were Senior year Jefferson students, two of the most talented flyers and Quodpot players that our school has known its 150 years plus of existence. Arthur was raised in The Bahamas, where his muggleborn American expatriate parents ran a hotel. He picked Great Lakes precisely because he wanted to see what life was like without a constant tan. Ryan was, like far too many of you, a pariah in his family, kicked out for being a Wizard. Jim Bouton’s family took him in, and he never lacked for love. Ryan was from Owensboro, Kentucky, and like Art, was months away from becoming a wealthy professional Quodpot player. That didn’t stop them from taking the first opportunity they could to stop the muggle mortars, using tactics that will long be celebrated and honored for their ingenuity and resourcefulness. They died as heroes, and I honor them.”

“There was one other death in our family here. Raffles, the major-domo of our house elf staff, was killed by machine gun fire. He was on a mission I asked him to perform, and died because of it. Raffles had been a part of the Great Lakes family for 105 years, his parents being part of the original staff when the school was founded. Great Lakes runs as smoothly as it does because of our house elf staff, who are the most capable and talented staff of elves in the world.”

“Jeannie Baum, a Transition year student in Proctor, is in the med station right now in a coma. Dr. Carter assures me that she is going to live, that the head injuries she suffered will just take some time to heal, and she will be as good as new. Jeannie is the youngest athlete on the Proctor Quodpot team, and is the top student in her year in Muggle Studies. Jeannie is from just down the road in Marquette, and like Ross Karver, was on the front line of the Proctor defense.” Murray took on a more lighthearted tone for the next round.

“Jim Bouton and Harry Potter were the other students who blatantly defied my instructions and fought for their schoolmates. Jim was the sole survivor of the dive bombing raid against the mortars, and somehow evaded a muggle surface to air missile, choosing to sacrifice the west stands instead, though they were in need of refurbishment anyway. Jim is a Jefferson senior, mourning the loss of his two best friends. Jim, you did a very brave thing this morning, and

I salute you.” The crowd of students had been silent up to this point, but a very respectful round of applause was given to the Senior, with Murray and the rest of the faculty joining in heartily. Bouton just briefly raised his hand in acknowledgement.

“Harry Potter, as is his wont apparently, wasted little time in deciding that the best defense is a good offense. He was out the Cortez door in under two minutes, wands in hand, and he took down the first Lycan he saw almost immediately, getting shot in the process. He was soon joined by his business partners and foster brothers Fred and George Weasley, visiting here from Great Britain, and the three of them cleared away the threats on the fourth floor, and then gave us some badly needed assistance on the faculty floor. Fred and George had no truck in this fight, though as some of you might know, they will be attending school here for a few months starting in April, but they did not hesitate to help their future schoolmates and current brother. The three of them showed outstanding courage and quick thinking. I thank you Harry, and I salute you.” Another round of applause from the assembled students. Harry just stood there, realizing why Murray was doing it, but not taking any pleasure in the whole thing.

“Classes will be held as scheduled on Monday, in some way, shape, or form. A list for the Monday schedule will be posted in the Lounges tomorrow night, by no later than 9:00 pm. Temporary staircases will be available by tomorrow morning, though I will not encourage you to leave the building. Going from the fifth floor to the fourth, or vice versa is fine, but you should not be going outside, even to gawk at the damage. And I agree that there is a lot to gawk at. Decisions will be made tomorrow and Monday on the repair and reconstruction of the school, when I know something definitive, I will pass it on to you. This is still our home, we defended it as well as we could, and we are still standing. I want your thoughts and good wishes tonight to go out to the families of those students we lost, and to the families of our brave and dedicated Aurors, who did a tremendous job of protecting us from depredations that could have been much worse. Any questions, talk to your Senior leaders, if you’re a Senior, come down and talk to myself or Professor Heyman. Thank you, now go get inside and warm up.” The students walked back through the makeshift hole that they had come out of, and the faculty conjured up

temporary ladders so that the kids could get to their floors. Harry hung back for a brief question.

“Ma’am, does outside mean the roof as well? I’d like to check on my plants if you don’t mind.” Murray didn’t see the harm in that, and appreciated that he was asking permission rather than acting on his own.

“Sure Harry, just don’t make a show of going up there okay?”

“One Disillusionment Charm coming right up.”

“Good enough. How’s the shoulder?”

“Sore, but I’ll live.”

“And we’re all grateful for that. Be in my office at 11:45 am tomorrow for the trip over to Boston.”

“Yes ma’am, see you then.” He left with the rest of the gang, and aside from using a Dictating Quill to write a long letter to Neville and Luna, Harry didn’t do much. Jonas borrowed Dobby and sent an equally long letter to his father, letting him know of the general way of things now. They all decided to crash in the trunk that night, just to be on the safe side, and the seven of them had a late night playing board games and talking. His plants were intact, amazingly enough, none of the mortar fire had come too close to them, just some debris and dust that needed to be cleaned off them. He was about two weeks from harvesting anything from them, and was already looking forward to it.

Sunday, February 16, 1997

Noon GMT

The Leaky Cauldron

Narcissa Malfoy arrived first, and took a table in the corner. She was technically not under any kind of watch list by the Aurors, Draco’s

story not having gotten out, and for all people knew, Dumbledore could have stage managed the whole thing as she had claimed. Tom, by custom, did not comment on who came in and out of his establishment, Voldemort himself could take a table and Tom would not tattle on him. She was still nervous though, as the Aurors and Dumbledore both would want to speak with her at length, with and without drugs. Her sister had assured her that the letter was on the up and up, and she had not shared the contents of it with her husband, who was temporarily out of the country doing Merlin knows what, or Voldemort, who veto the plan inside a millisecond. This was not a Death Eater sitting at this table, it was a mother wanting news of her son. After about five, incredibly long, minutes of waiting, Andromeda Tonks came through the front door. She saw her sister after a bit of looking, and came and sat down. Neither spoke for a few seconds, and then Andromeda threw out a hesitant:

“Hello Cissy.” They both smiled now.

“Andy. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes it has. You look well.”

“You too. How is your daughter?” No mention of Ted.

“She’s fine, working very hard. How is Bella?” No mention of Lucius.

“Being Bella, you know how she is.”

“Did she ever tell you that I visited her once, at Azkaban?”

“No she didn’t, when was this?”

“About eight years ago, give or take a month. I’m not surprised she didn’t remember it, it was during a bad time there for her, she and her husband had not been allowed contact in a few months, and she was.....well she was not doing well.”

“I’m surprised they let you in there, they never would me.” I wonder why, Andromeda thought.

“They said I wasn’t a risk, and I surrendered my wand and anything else that could have been used as a weapon. I wasn’t there long, seeing her like that. Well I’m sure you can relate, after getting Lucius back.”

“I know what you mean. Now, how is Draco?”

“He is awake and recovering more quickly now. I spoke to him last night in the Hospital Wing, and he wanted me here to talk to you.”

“About anything in particular, or just to let me know that he is better?” Andromeda reached her left hand into the pocket of her robes, a movement unnoticed by her sister.

“Both. I’m sorry Cissy, I had no choice here.” She quickly reached out and seized her sister’s left arm.

“Activate!” The portkey vanished them in a heartbeat.

They landed just outside the front gates of Hogwarts.

“What the hell have you done Andy?!”

“Draco wants to talk to you, I swear Cissy, that’s the truth. He’s in the Hospital Wing right now waiting for you.”

“Dumbledore sent you to trap me!”

“Only on Draco’s instructions Cissy. Your son is calling most of the shots here.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Go in there, and find out. You know I’m not lying, I would never lie to you.” The two sisters stood there for a moment, looking at each

other. Narcissa had a portkey of her own on hand, but never tried to use it. Nor did she attempt to Apparate. These were good things, because Remus had put up wards against both, just as the two sisters were meeting in The Leaky Cauldron.

“Fine, let’s go then.” They walked up to the front doors, and were met by Bones.

“Why Mrs. Malfoy, imagine seeing you here.” The women did not have what one could call a positive history with one another.

“Just lead me to my son.”

“Follow me.” They made the walk down to the Hospital Wing, where Draco was still, to everyone’s relief, the only patient. Narcissa rushed over to hug her son, and he squeezed back.

“Draco darling, what have they done to you?”

“These people haven’t done anything wrong Mother, don’t worry. It was Greyback and his ilk.”

“We paid the ransom, I can’t believe they dropped you off here.”

“How much was the ransom?”

“It was 500,000 galleons, and your father and Lord Voldemort did not hesitate to pay it. They only wanted you back safely.” There was over five percent of his inheritance down the drain, but he knew it was necessary. He looked his mother straight in the eye.

“They bit me Mother.” That did not register at first.

“What are you talking about?” Draco looked over at Remus.

“How many bites were there Professor Lupin?” The use of Remus’ title alone seemed to jar Narcissa back into reality, as her son had never referred to the man with anything approaching respect before.

“We counted 22 bites Narcissa. He is a werewolf.”

“You cannot be serious.” Draco would save that for Hermione, who had said the exact same words to him less than a day before, he assumed that she loved irony as well as the next person. Being with Weasley would seem to assure that.

“I’ve been through a change Mother, Dumbledore showed it to me via pensieve last night, after we sent the letter to you. I was still unconscious when I changed, but it was real. I can feel it Mother, I can feel the difference inside me.” This genuinely moved both Dumbledore and Andromeda, but Narcissa still didn’t seem like she got it.

“This can’t be happening.”

“It is Mother, and I’ve spent the last 24 hours facing facts and accepting the reality of the world with which I’ve been presented. And you if think it’s hard for you, imagine for one second what it must be like for me. I had Professor Lupin talk me through what happens and let me tell you, no muggle horror film is more terrifying.” He and Remus had spoken, alone, for over an hour.

“So you have reached an accord with these people?” She wasn’t so stupid after all was she?

“Yes, but some of the terms still need to be met, and that’s why you’re here.”

“You want me to defect as well? You expect me to forsake our Lord and join them?” Well that saved him from having to ask straight out.

“Yes I do Mother.”

“Why?”

“Because I mean more to you than Father, or Aunt Bella, or Voldemort.” The first time Draco had not said ‘Lord’. And that was a powerful troika of people to turn her back on.

“You do, but I don’t know if that is enough.”

“You know it is Mother, I mean c’mon. What did you think was going to happen with Aunt Andromeda today? Reminiscing with a sister you haven’t seen for how many years? What did you think was going to happen when you found out that Greyback had me?! Are you trying to tell me that you and Father did not contemplate that I might be turned into a werewolf!” Draco had never screamed at her before, and while it was at least partially a performance on his part, there was some realism to it, and it had its intended effect.

“Of course we thought of what might happen, but your father believed that if we did what they wanted, that you would be returned unharmed.”

“He was wrong though, wasn’t he?”

“Yes he was. What do you want from me Draco?”

“Do you love me Mother?”

“More than anything.”

“Then hop a fence, and do what is best for me.”

“And fight on a losing side?”

“We won’t lose, you and I will help tip the balance. Every minute that Potter is over there, he gets stronger and more ready. Every werewolf, not me or Professor Lupin, wielding machine guns that he has to kill, only makes him more ruthless. If we can delay Voldemort just a little longer, Potter will take him. This is my only out Mother, Voldemort would kill me on sight, and Greyback would never believe that I would join him.” Narcissa just stood there for two minutes, not saying

anything or moving at all, just breathing, and thinking. She looked at all of the others: Remus Lupin, Dumbledore, Pomfrey, Bones, and her sister Andromeda.

“All right Draco, I’ll do what you want.”

“Thank you Mother.” He then turned to Bones.

“My immunity grant is to be extended to her as well Madam Bones.”

“Of course, I have already had the papers drawn up. The Minister is fully in accord with the deal, and will tell you as such in person if you wish.”

“The next time he happens by is fine with me. Mother, you have the Gringotts key with you?”

“Of course, I never leave Headquarters without it.” They would find out later that she had no idea where Headquarters was.

“Good, I’m sorry Mother, but you can’t go back there.”

“I know. We’ll put Malfoy Manor under Fidelius or something, I don’t know.”

“And we have to move the money from the vault. If Father gets one whiff that you’re gone for good, the game is up.”

“He’s in Bulgaria right now, doing something that he wouldn’t tell me about. He’s not supposed to come back until Wednesday.”

“Then we have all the time in the world. Except that we don’t dare waste an hour, so you should go today.” Never mind that it was the Malfoy family’s money, magical marriage law was very specific in Britain: if both parties were fully magical, no squibs, then inherited property was automatically community property right away. With squibs and muggles the law was much different, though muggleborns, such as Ted Tonks, were still considered fully magical.

“Before you do that Narcissa, there are various Oaths you must swear. I know, Draco, that we have not satisfied all of your demands, but your mother is not a medical patient right now, and we need some guarantees from her before letting her loose into the public. Even at that, we will need to send someone with her to Gringotts.” Everyone looked at Draco.

“Here’s an idea, get Granger and the others down here right now and get that done. Professor Lupin promised his best efforts with Potter, and like I said yesterday, that will be enough if the rest of them agree.” That was not a bad idea, and Remus looked ready to leave.

“I notice that you left Luna Lovegood off the list, she was one of the DOM people too. Are you sure about that?”

“Lovegood is not a threat to anyone who doesn’t attack her, so no, she’s not necessary. I will be swearing multiple Oaths not to attack her or anyone else on your side. I believe in being thorough, but I trust her not to nail me.”

“Good point, I’ll go get the kids now.”

“Thank you.” Bones, anticipating all of this with her customary skill, had a series of parchments ready for Narcissa and Draco. But before that, she went on to the floo and got The Minister over there. He arrived right before Hermione and the others.

“Well, well, talk about a 180 degree turnaround. Fudge would probably have a stroke if he could see this.” Narcissa had never liked this man, though she did have a degree of respect for him, unlike her feelings for his predecessor.

“It’s always a pleasure Minister.”

“No doubt. After your trip to the bank, we’ll send some people with you to Fidelius your house. All of your house elf staff will need to be discharged of course, since they will still be partially loyal to your husband. We’ll arrange new servants for you obviously.”

“Who report to you.”

“If you’re not doing anything against your Oaths, then you have nothing to worry about do you? Can you blame us Narcissa? With your past history and political views? We’re giving you a lifeline, and a sizable fortune to boot.”

“I know, and I am not totally ungrateful.”

“Just mostly.” This made her snap a little, with the others wondering why it had taken so long.

“Forgive me if I have not had much time to process all of this!” Rufus had a fascinating way of deflecting such anger: he basically ignored it and moved on with what he wanted to talk about. Bones had long marveled at this, it was a fantastic way of keeping control of the conversation, and deflated his opponents as well. She couldn’t remember the last time Rufus had raised his voice at anyone for more than one or two words, and she had known him for over 20 years.

“You are forgiven. Now I have one change to the program here. I want to be the one to tell Potter about all of this. I’m traveling to North America next Monday and I have a meeting set with him the following day, one that was arranged before this and yesterday’s werewolf fiasco. So that means no telling the prankster twins, they’ll have that information to him five minutes later, and we can’t be having that.”

“Why not Minister?”

“Because then Potter will have time to plan his response, and will certainly yank our pants down and exploit the situation.” Dumbledore could certainly believe that, with ample examples for him to choose from in recent memory.

“But you will get him to sign the Oath?”

“I will do what I must to get it done. A direct appeal from The Minister right upon hearing the news will do the trick. Swear the other kids to make sure they don’t blab to him. I want to hit him with it myself, no advance warning.” Any rejoinder was blunted by the arrivals of Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny. The surprised looks from Ron, Ginny, and Neville at the guest list confirmed that Hermione had not found a way around her Oaths. Dumbledore smiled at them, and invited them to sit down.....Ron in particular would need to sit down.

“Good afternoon. We have a story to tell you, and a request to make of each of you. This is very important for the war, and we need open minds from all of you.” He spent the next 10 minutes summarizing the situation for them, pretending as though Hermione had not heard any of this. While this was going on, Narcissa was standing quietly next to Draco, who was doing his best to look as trustworthy as possible. He still didn’t really like any of the four, but felt that he should do his part to get them to sign off on this.

Ginny started off:

“So let me get this straight: Draco Malfoy is joining our side of the war. He’s not sitting it out or leaving the country, he’s actively going to fight with us?”

“You know that I’m sitting right here, don’t you?”

“ And yet somehow I don’t care Malfoy. I was asking the Headmaster.”

“Yes Miss Weasley, that is the upshot of the agreement.”

“And he is a werewolf?”

“Yes he is.”

“Like Professor Lupin?”

“There is only one kind Miss Weasley.”

“How secure are these Oaths that he and his mother are taking? Can they be gotten around?” Remus took that one.

“No Ginny, they’re just like the parchment that Hermione made up last year, that trapped Marietta Edgecombe, only much, much harsher in retribution. Tonks and I signed them at Sirius’ will reading, or one like them.”

“Promising what?” That was none of her business, but Remus wanted to see the looks on Draco’s and Narcissa’s faces.

“ That we would protect Harry from Dumbledore.” Mission accomplished, as Mother Malfoy looked stunned, while her son started howling with laughter.

“Oh man, I suspected it was bad between you two, but that even Black.....oh my God.” He couldn’t speak anymore, the laughing was too much for him.

“So happy to have entertained you Draco. So yes Ginny, we are willing to bet our lives on this, and we’re asking you lot to do so as well.”

“Couldn’t Voldemort have done the same thing? Made you two sign Oaths like that?”

“He could have, but he didn’t. Maybe the other Death Eaters did, I don’t know. Neither Draco nor I have Dark Marks, and it appears as though it will stay that way. I do not like being put into a corner like this, but I will abide by the agreement I signed and swore an Oath to.”

“So will I, not that I have much choice here really.” Ron had a question.

“I have something to ask here. What potions have you lot been drinking that convinces you that Harry will agree to any of this? This

is the stupidest thing I've heard all week, and I live in a House with two Creeveys, no way does Harry go along with this. He'll kill Draco and all of you first." All eyes looked to The Minister.

"It is our feeling that, presented properly, he will agree with little trouble."

"You'll pay him off?"

"No, we will convince him with facts, logic, and an appeal for what is right. Harry will respond to that." And if you people go along too, he did not add. All the adults were really hoping Hermione would lead off, and she did not disappoint.

"I'll swear the Oaths that you want me to." The others waited for her to go on, but she did nothing but stare pointedly at her friends. Ginny:

"So will I." Neville:

"Draco, if I find that you've gotten around your promises in any manner at all, you're a dead man. I'm in." Draco smiled at him, but said nothing in response. Now only Ron was left.

"I still don't like this, and I don't believe that Harry or the twins will agree to it. But on the off chance that they do, I won't be the only holdout. I'm in." Remus, astounded that it had been that easy, quickly seized on it, and immediately got everyone started on signing and swearing, the kids and the Malfoys. It was done a few minutes later, and the kids were sworn as well not to tell Harry or the twins what was going on, other than Draco being awake. Draco, feeling the hostility, got out of bed for his first non-bathroom trip in over a month, and offered his hand to Neville.

"There's no going back now Longbottom, we've all crossed the Rubicon." Neville shook it.

"I'm worried what's going to happen once it's gotten out that hell has actually frozen over." He left, and the other three shook his hand as

well before leaving themselves. The Minister looked on in amusement, this would be a hilarious scene to show or tell Harry about.

“Now, Narcissa, we have a banking transaction to complete, and then your house to attend to. I don’t see why all of this can’t be done within the hour. Let’s go to it shall we?”

“Are you going to make all of this public?”

“No, but that might not stop Voldemort or your husband, once they find out you’ve left, with all the money.”

“Let’s get this over with.” She left with Scrimgeour and Bones, and Dumbledore got a floo call later that afternoon, saying that everything was done. He came back down to tell Draco, who seemed pleased.

“When am I getting out of here?”

“Tomorrow morning I will take you to Diagon Alley and Ollivander’s, you will be needing a new wand. We will give you the rest of the day to acclimate yourself to it, and then you can resume your class schedule on Tuesday. It will take you some time to catch up, but I have spoken to your teachers, and they will give you until the end of the school year to make up the lost work.”

“Sounds like a plan. Wouldn’t you love to be a fly on the wall when Rufus meets Potter to tell him about all of this?”

“Yes I would Draco, yes I would.” They looked at each other, and both seemed glad of the new way of things.

Executive Conference Room, Congressional Building

Boston, Massachusetts

Noon

President Chabon presided over the first meeting of the School Defense Commission, a drab title to be sure, but this wasn’t a public

forum anyway. With sandwiches and soda bottles in front of them, the members eyed each other curiously.

“All right let’s get started. We’re all familiar with each other I’m sure, but let’s go around the tables and introduce ourselves. I’m Michael Chabon, President of the Wizard United States.” Around the room from his left:

“Mike Jacobson, Auror in Charge.”

“Hollie Baylor, Midwest Congresswoman.”

“Robert Clary, Headmaster of Tecumseh.”

“Henry Hill, Defense teacher, Tecumseh.”

“Richard Walsh, Defense teacher, Pathfinder.”

“James Morrison, Headmaster, Pathfinder.”

“Sarah Clarke, Head Auror, San Francisco.”

“Beau Shupe, Headmaster, Salem.”

“Esteban Rodriguez, Head Auror, Boston.”

“Raymond Parker, Defense teacher, Salem.”

“Dick Greenleaf, Defense teacher, Great Lakes.”

“Joanne Murray, Headmistress, Great Lakes.”

“Harry Potter, Junior year student, Great Lakes.”

“Thank you all for coming, there is much to discuss. Now first off, I want to adopt a rule: What’s said in this room, stays in this room. I want everyone, from myself on around the table, to be able to say whatever he or she thinks needs to be said, with no fear of

repercussions. In other words, no grudges of any kind, no matter what any superior or subordinate of yours says. If I find out that this directive has been flouted, there will be serious hell to pay.” The 13 folk around the table all nodded.

“Good. A few news items: Questioning of our two captives revealed relatively little, but enough that Tulsa Aurors staged a raid this morning and killed five Lycans outside of Dallas, Texas. None of those killed were high up in the Lyncan order, but all were soldier types, and every little bit helps. Mike, you have a report on the ordnance that they used yesterday?”

“I do, the Great Lakes folks recovered all of the M-30 machine guns used inside their school, and we traced the serial numbers on the weapons to a muggle military supply depot in North Carolina. It turns out that they had a massive theft of munitions and such from there in January. It was never announced in the muggle newspapers, and we only found out through our moles in their intelligence networks.” Jacobson and the Auror Command had human sources and Listening Charms in most important muggle security agencies, but there was a lot of information and not a lot of magical people to monitor them.

“So that’s how they afforded all of that, it must have been millions of dollars of gear they expended.”

“It was valued at just over \$12 million, meaning that they didn’t use it all against us.” Chabon let them chew on that for a moment, then interrupted.

“Now I would like to replay, via pensieve, the experiences of all of you who were involved in yesterday’s action. Questions can be asked after each showing.” Chabon, Jacobson, and Hollie Baylor were the only ones not involved in some way, and this portion of the meeting took over four hours, as there were many different stories to tell. The ones of Henry Hill, Murray, and Harry were the longest and most detailed. All three of them were asked many questions, and the key one always seemed to be:

“What would you have done differently?” Hill’s answer was somewhat noncommittal, and a little defensive.

“Nothing really, our sole objective was to fight a delaying action, so as to give the kids time to get out. I wasn’t about to wage war on Merlin knows how many Lycans with just the four of us. I’m told that there were only 25 per school, there could easily have been 500 per school.”

Murray took the opposite tack.

“I would have spread out my faculty a lot better, and engaged them in a more wide arc. I agree with the point Henry made earlier though, in that we did not know how many we were facing, and that was the key issue, whatever booby traps and explosives that they used.”

Harry, who had not said a word since introducing himself:

“I would have moved a lot quicker, and used some more offensive type spells than the ones I used. I guess the only reason I hesitated is that I didn’t want to leave the Proctor guys defenseless, as they would have been if my brothers and I had been killed or seriously injured while trying something rash.” Esteban Rodriguez, who had been defending the Congressional Building during the battle, was curious about something.

“What was it like to be shot?” None of the other combatants in the room had taken any rounds themselves, both in their battle yesterday or in the past.

“Which time?” He said that with a grim smile, and the room all smiled with him. He continued.

“Not the most pleasant way to spend a morning, but better a bullet or three than Avada Kedavra. I’ll have a story to tell for the rest of my life.....a life with admittedly more years than most of you probably.” A nice joke to highlight his youth, and it worked. No one seemed to have any resentment toward Harry being there, or for being a mere

student. This would not have been the case with The Dark Force Defense League.

“How did you sneak your brothers in under the wards?” Murray and Greenleaf smirked at that, and Greenleaf answered for Harry.

“A magician never reveals his secrets Ms. Clarke.” Lots of laughter there, and Chabon cleared his throat.

“Now first off, we need to focus on the issue of whether or not to move the school locations themselves.” Contrary to what Abel Rosnovski had hypothesized, reconstruction had not begun yesterday, though the materials and workers had by now been arranged. Beau Shupe immediately threw his two cents in on that one, though his school had already begun repairs on its own.

“I think we have no choice here, they have to be moved. Even under Fidelius, there would have to be massive scenery changes of the local surroundings in order to stay where we are.” Raymond Parker, Shupe’s Defense teacher:

“And there is another problem. It’s a muggle device called a GPS, a Global Positioning System. It takes electronic data from satellites and can give someone a precise position to the foot of where they are.” Hill looked confused.

“What does that have to do with this?”

“What it means is that all it takes is one Lycan Wizard willing to risk detection, and all they would have to do is stand next to one of the schools and they could get an exact reading of where it is. Once they have that, they can target us pell mell no matter what hiding spells we put on the school. It wouldn’t take much for them to steal a muggle missile, a larger one, and use the coordinates and fire it. Or one of their planes for that matter. A direct hit by either a missile or a plane would be catastrophic, and we would have absolutely no warning.” That gave everyone in the room a moment of pause. Harry had a thought.

“Now my understanding is that magic interferes with electronics unless the electronics are modified, right?” Nods all around.

“Can’t new fields of magical barriers be put up to counteract that modification? I know it wouldn’t work for the airplane scenario, but wouldn’t it help for ground combat?” Jacobson started musing out loud.

“That’s a good idea actually, if they try the Stinger approach again, the missiles would just go dead upon hitting the field. So would any large missile fired, unless they dropped it right from on top, their guidance packages would simply stop. Yes, that would work.” Chabon was intrigued as well.

“We could put the fields out as far as a mile for all the schools save Salem where they are now. Good idea Harry.”

“Thank you sir, but my vote, if asked for, would be to still move the schools. Why take the chance otherwise?” Rodriguez jumped in.

“I’m with Harry on that, the cost would be steep, but we can’t afford to have 1300 children exposed to muggle weapons again. We got lucky, because they were only sending a message, but next time we won’t be so fortunate.” Robert Clary, of Tecumseh, cleared his throat.

“I suppose someone should say it, but shouldn’t we at least consider the possibility of a negotiated peace with the Lycans? It’s not as if we owe The Kindred anything.” That didn’t get the derisive response that Clary had figured upon, but there were no heads nodding in agreement either. Chabon answered him.

“Yes Robert, that did need to be said out loud, and I thank you for it.....but it is also not practical at the current time. Our business alliance with The Kindred is in full swing, and it would be very hard to disentangle. Plus, it would send the wrong message to both The Kindred and the Lycans if we tuck tail and run at the first hint of calamity. It might even encourage them to band together and wipe us out, since we are the only group among the three non-muggle collectives that masses it’s people in large places, like our schools

and the Alleys. We are the easiest targets.” Sarah Clarke turned to Hollie Baylor, who was Chair of the Congressional Finance Committee.

“Congresswoman, can we afford to move the schools, and perhaps the Alleys, at the present time? Will the budget allow it?”

“Yes it will, we currently have quite a bit socked away, that was scheduled to be used for improvements on the schools and our various Athletic Fields. Add that to the launch of the DVD later this year, and we can pay for it without any long-term borrowing.”

They talked for another 30 minutes on how to accomplish this, and Chabon sent some of his staff out to scout the land situation. It was now approaching 6:00 pm, and The President could tell that people were getting edgy, having sat in one place for that long a time.

“Okay, let’s adjourn for the night, and meet back here tomorrow evening at 6:00 pm. Dinner will be served while we talk, and we should have alternate locations ready for approval. Right now we should just plan on moving the four schools, as the Alleys are likely too urban for them to go after with a huge assault, but we can still keep it in mind.” Everyone stood up, and a few headed straight for the door to get the floo to their homes, or in the cases of Hill and Clary, to their guest rooms at Pathfinder and Salem, respectively. Murray and Greenleaf seemed to be in no hurry, so Harry leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was approached by Shupe, who tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hello Harry, I’m Beau Shupe.”

“Nice to meet you sir.” They shook hands.

“I like those Howlers you came up with, very creative.”

“The President said he saw one on your desk.”

“I got one from a rebellious student, she didn’t like getting a detention too many.” Harry started snickering, he could relate to that.

“Jam is easy to clean off though.”

“Fortunately. You mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Why Great Lakes? I’ve talked with Clary and Morrison, and they say that you didn’t seem to shop around over here.” Murray saw this conversation out of the corner of her eye, but didn’t come over. Shupe was asking in a curious way, and didn’t seem confrontational about it, so Harry decided to give him an honest answer, as Parker and Rodriguez joined the conversation, having heard Shupe’s question.

“It was thought by my solicitor and by then Minister Fudge that you were too close an ally of Dumbledore for my comfort. Add that to Professor Murray having a bad history with the old man, and I didn’t need to shop around more than I did. I would have if she had said no, but she didn’t, and the rest is history.” Shupe had a thoughtful look on his face.

“Interesting.”

“Were they wrong about you and Dumbledore?”

“Not totally, Albus and I have always gotten along well. That said, I would not have handed you back to him if you had wanted to come to Salem.” Sure you wouldn’t have, Harry thought, though he kept his face friendly. His decision had just been totally validated as far as he was concerned.

“I wasn’t accusing you sir, I acted on the advice I had access to at the time.”

“I didn’t think you were accusing, don’t worry. I don’t blame you really, Dumbledore is a powerful presence. Can’t be too careful with your own safety.”

“I know that better than most I’m sure. Let me ask you for your opinion on this: Do you think the Pathfinder and Tecumseh Headmasters would have handed me back?” Both Clary and Morrison had left by now, and Murray and Greenleaf had now come over.

“Clary wouldn’t have taken you in the first place, he hates controversy of any kind, and the press attention would have dissuaded him. He even told me that, in so many words. Morrison? I think he would have abided by any deal you two struck, but he would have probably extracted some concessions along the way.” This got Harry’s curiosity aroused.

“Such as?”

“You would have become The Poster Boy of Pathfinder, literally.”

“What would that have accomplished? Don’t you four have specific areas where you get your students?”

“There are always stray students floating around, those with American parents who live abroad, and those who have parents who already work for a school, and the rare student like yourself. You would have had a lot of recruitment meetings on your schedule, not to mention making an appearance or five before Congress when funding battles came about.” Harry looked visibly nauseated at the thought of all that, and turned to Murray.

“In case I haven’t said it lately, thank you.” Murray just patted him on the shoulder.

“You’re welcome, and you have been more than properly appreciative in case you were wondering. Besides, I have to keep my daughter’s boss happy.” Harry looked at Shupe, who was very amused.

“She’s a model employee.”

“She’s one of our finest students Joanne, thanks for sending her over.” It had been quite a coup at the time.

“She’s very happy there Beau, so you can’t really begrudge me Harry can you?” Touché, thought Shupe with a laugh.

“I guess I can’t, can I? Well Ray and I had better get back, dinner will be over soon. See you all tomorrow.” The Massachusetts based people left, and now only the Great Lakes contingent remained, along with a Chabon gofer who was cleaning things up.

“So Harry, your first taste of being around American power?”

“Very illuminating I thought.”

“Now you can’t share the substance of these meetings with your friends, at least not your friends at school. Fred and George will probably be fine, since they aren’t directly involved.” And she knew he would tell them anyway.

“I’ve already told them that ma’am, and they fully understand. Even Sophie.”

“I’m sure you’ll suffer for that later on.”

“No, she seemed fine with it. Its hard to tell though.”

“Welcome to the romantic world. Dick here has it easy, he doesn’t have to deal with women.” Greenleaf was technically out of the closet, though he was single at the moment.

“I’m sure my job will be in jeopardy if I say what I really want to say right now.” They all laughed.

“Your first hire right? To replace yourself?”

“Quite the dilemma actually, who to replace the greatest Defense teacher in human history.” She said it with such a mocking tone that it

took the bragging out of it. Harry was not a little flattered that Murray would joke like that in front of him, which furthered his resolve to keep this whole thing private.

“So what did you guys decide about classes tomorrow?”

“It’s all going to be lecture type things this week, nothing practical except for the Wandless classes, which can only be practical. They’ll mostly be held in the basement for the smaller ones, and the Lounges and offices for the others. It’s going to be rough going at first, lot’s of Silencing Bubbles and things like that in the Lounges, but we’ll manage. What do you have tomorrow?”

“ Just Regular Transfiguration in the morning with Wash.....err.....Professor Washburne.” The other two laughed, and Greenleaf shot back.

“What do you think we call him? I’m not sure I’ve ever called him anything else, at least without any students around.”

“Hey, Hoban’s a cool name if you ask me.”

“Please don’t get him started on that. Anyway, your class will be meeting in the Proctor Lounge, the notices will be posted tonight, and each night thereafter for the following day’s classes.”

“How hard is it going to be to move the school?”

“Hard, but doable. It will take the combined efforts of every single faculty member and a like number of powerful students. So keep some time next weekend free.”

“Just a mass of Wingardium Leviosa?”

“No, there is a more advanced spell for something that heavy. It requires a lot more power, but in concert with other spell casters, can lift a lot more weight per person. I’m betting that 40-45 of us can pull it off. We’ll just need to have a basement ready, and the first two floors

for when we get there.” Harry had a hard time imaging all this, but she seemed pretty confident about it.

“We should get back now Harry, I’m sure we’ll have a lot to do tomorrow.” They walked to the next room, where the floo was located. They got back to school to find it still standing, in it’s new and shorter form. Sophie and the others did not harangue Harry too badly about the meeting, though he did share the Shupe conversation with them, to their vast amusement.

The following day’s meeting of the commission was spent pinpointing alternative sites for the schools, and the sites were selected, and agreements made as to the allocation of rebuilding resources. Construction of Tecumseh was set for the next day and was to continue until Friday, when half the resources would be diverted to rebuild the half of Great Lakes that needed to be in place before Sunday’s move of the top three floors. Half of each regional Auror staff was deployed to guard each school in the meantime, with the Tulsa group, which had no school to guard, taking over regular assignments in the other locations.

Classes managed to stay on normal schedule that week at Great Lakes, though many were truncated by the teachers presiding, citing too many distractions. Muggle Studies, Arithmancy, and Astronomy were canceled altogether, with extra homework assignments given. Harry, to his immense relief, was not asked to replay his battle for Basic Combat, but both classes dealt with nothing but Lycan related issues. Harry and Ripley were both asked to show off their scars, and added to the very light ones on Harry’s right hand, he was now firmly resolved to never get a tattoo.....the scars were his body art.

The commission met for an hour on every night that week, with mostly idea brainstorming. Harry tried to keep pretty quiet, but a lot of the Aurors and Defense teachers would ask him for his view on how the new measures would impact the students, so he wound up on stage much more than he had thought. He enjoyed it though, and on Friday night, Jacobson told him what Biller had already privately alluded to: If he wanted a job in the American Auror Command, he didn’t need to waste time on little matters like attending the Academy.

The thought intrigued him, but he told Jacobson that he would see what happened in the coming months, and thanks for the offer.

On Sunday afternoon, the school was emptied, and all the faculty, plus most everyone in Advanced Charms, levitated three floors of their school over to the new site, which was five miles away. It was a long walk, punctuated by rest stops every half mile. The whole process took four hours, and all involved were totally whipped by the end of it all. They succeeded though, and the mass of building never took a dip in the air, much less was dropped. The new floors were good to go, and the construction team was waiting for the final touches after it was all done. The athletic field was to be moved the following week, in stages this time. Quodpot and Quidditch practices were still two months away anyway. Monday afternoon, certain faculty members, along with Harry, Jim Bouton, and a newly out of her coma Jeannie Baum, were invited to the old school site, where they laid waste to the now empty basement area, collapsing it all. It was a fun use of Abrumpere by teachers and students alike, and the old was finished, now on with the new. The new wards were still being discussed, and would be implemented over the course of the month of March.

Tuesday, February 25, 1997

Great Lakes Conference Room B, Basement Level

4:15 pm

Harry walked down from Defense class, still wondering what Rufus wanted from him. Travis had not been very helpful in that regard, saying in a quick note that it would be better for Harry to experience it for himself, but that he himself would be there. He was finally get used to the situation at the new and improved Great Lakes, though he had taken a flight on his broom, and it looked strange to see new landmarks. He knocked on the door, and without waiting for an answer, walked into the room.

Rufus and Travis were there, and no one else. They rose to greet him, and Harry dropped his stuff on the large table before shaking hands.

“Good to see you again Harry.”

“You too Minister, Travis.” His friend gave him the once over.

“You recovered from your injuries?”

“I am, I found out for a couple of days just how much I use my left arm.” Rufus couldn’t help smiling at that.

“No doubt. Have a seat.” Harry took off his suit coat and draped it over the chair next to him. Travis took in the dress shirt and tie that Harry was wearing.

“It’s strange to see students who aren’t in robes.”

“It was just as strange not to wear them at first either.” He started giggling at a thought, and the two men gave him a funny look.

“Sorry, I was just remembering this guy at the Quidditch World Cup a few years ago. One of the Ministry types was bitching at him for wearing his robes and not muggle clothes, and he said that he liked having a healthy breeze round his privates.” Rufus and Travis both burst out laughing.

“My friend Hermione nearly had a fit laughing about it.”

“Hard to blame her.”

“When I need a giggle, all I have to do is think about it. So what’s on your mind?”

“A few things to discuss with you. On a somewhat lighter note at first: last month we located Cornelius Fudge.” This was interesting.

“I’m guessing that he was nowhere near Britain?”

“He was about as far away from there as you can get. Australia.”

“Hiding out?”

“He was nailed in a search for the Aussie version of Voldemort.”

“That Davey Hando guy? The Chronicle talks about him at least once a week.”

“Right, one of their Aurors spotted the magically enhanced house, and a few hours later, Amelia, my old crew, and I stormed the place and took Fudge into custody.” That was a pleasant idea, and Harry basked in it for a few seconds before getting back to business.

“Did you get the money back?”

“Most of it, but most of that was donated to the Australian government as part of the reward.”

“So I have a Fudge trial to look forward to eh. Interesting.” He couldn’t wait, but that was dashed immediately.

“Not so much really, there isn’t going to be a trial.” Harry’s eyes grew Luna like.

“You killed him? Wow, he was that tied into Voldemort was he?”

“No, we decided on a massive memory wipe and no trial.” The two of them explained the history of the decision making to him over the next ten minutes.

“Bones must have been livid, she seems like a real law and order type.”

“She was not in favor, but she went along with it.” Harry wondered at that, and then an epiphany hit him, of sorts.

“This is fascinating and all, and I’m totally glad you told me about it.....but why did you tell me about it?” Travis took that one.

“It was felt by us, and others, that you might be interested in some closure with the man.” He was, but Harry knew that there was more to it than that.

“And you’re buttering me up for something else? C’mon Minister, Travis, I was born at night but not last night. Why don’t you tell me what you guys need from me. If it’s not too painful, you’ll probably get it.”

“Well how painful is a matter of interpretation. Are you aware that Draco Malfoy has regained consciousness?”

“Neville mentioned it in his last letter.....that’s Neville Longbottom, Minister, I’m not sure how up you are on my relationships back at Hogwarts.”

“ I changed Neville’s diapers more than once Harry, Alice Longbottom is my first cousin.” Harry goggled at that, Neville had never once mentioned this to him.

“Wow.”

“Our mothers are sisters, and while Neville and I are not close, I do keep tabs on how he’s doing.”

“He never said a word about it.”

“Well Neville is not prone to bragging, and he keeps his family life very private. Anyhow, Neville mentioned Draco in his letter. When did you receive this letter?”

“Yesterday as a matter of fact.”

“Harry, we might as well cut to the chase here. Draco Malfoy was abducted by werewolves and turned.” Harry just sat there for a second.

“That’s pretty funny.”

“It’s no joke Harry, they really did.” He spent another minute thinking.

“Let me guess, he cut a deal with you, right?” Eyebrows raised.

“He did.”

“And I’m part of it somehow? I have to officially forgive him or something?” Rufus put his head in his hands, his carefully conceived plan was being shredded in front of his eyes.

“Please explain to Travis and I how you knew that.”

“You didn’t think it would be easy for me to figure all that out?”

“Not as easy as you made it.” Said Travis ruefully.

“What else did you give him?”

“The Malfoy money, the mansion, immunity for past crimes, and Oaths from you, the twins, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville.”

“And everyone has delivered but me?”

“And Fred and George. We put the others under a promise of silence, that’s why you’re hearing about it now.”

“What did he promise in exchange.”

“His membership in The Order of the Phoenix, full support by he and his mother for the war effort.”

“Dare I ask how you got the Malfoy money for him?”

“I’m sure you can figure it out, our other moves being so easy for you.” Harry smiled placidly at him.

“So he’s now on our side, as a werewolf, and we get his snotty little mother in the bargain, all in exchange for immunity and our promise not to murder him the first chance we get?”

“Or any chance you get, as long as he stays true to the deal. And those Oaths are very comprehensive Harry, he can’t back out. As he put it to Neville, he has crossed the Rubicon.”

“And what happens if the twins and I don’t go along with this?”

“The deal sticks, but we promised to make every effort to convince you.” Harry had known that they would want something from him for over a week now, and had a list of conditions all ready in his mind.

“I want Avada Kedavra privileges for the twins and I, no conditions except for an explanation to you two and/or Bones about why we used it.”

“That’s acceptable. Anything else?”

“I want all WWW products taken off the banned list at Hogwarts, forever.” Rufus didn’t bother to hide his smile at hearing that.

“That’s fine.”

“One more thing, I want copies of the documents Draco and his mother signed. Hand them over, and I’ll do the swearing.” Biller took a packet out of his pocket and enlarged it to full size.

“You’re not the only one who can anticipate things Harry.” Harry read them over briefly, muttering to himself a few times.

“This is fine, go ahead and swear me. I’ll talk to the twins and grease the skids for you there if you want. I don’t even know why he included them.”

“They’re your men, and he knows that. He knows that if you sent them after him, they’d get him.”

“And I thought I was the paranoid one.”

“We had an interesting chat with him. I think you should too Harry. I know you don’t want to come back to Britain anytime soon, but if you do.....you really should meet with him.”

“Meet with Draco Malfoy, who is now on the same side of the war as I am. What the hell else can happen?”

End Chapter

Author's Note: It's been.....well a long time since I took my college entrance exams, and if I get some of the details wrong, please forgive me. Also, they're probably six months or so from casting the role of Rufus Scrimgeour in the Half Blood movie, assuming that he's even in it, but I have my pick: Stephen Root, from News Radio and The West Wing. How bout that, another West Wing person in my story, please try not to fall out of your chairs/beds/couches. This is not a crossover story, so don't expect Presidents Bartlett or Santos to come on board. I know it will never happen, if for no other reason that Root is American, but I'm writing Rufus in that style. Oh, one last thing: This is a T-rated story and will stay that way. There is a scene set on Sophie's birthday that could be taken M very easily, but I won't go there. Use your imaginations.

Tuesday, February 25, 1997

Continued

Great Lakes Basement Conference Room B

"What the hell else can happen?"

"You would be surprised Harry." No I really wouldn't, Harry thought wryly. Even though it had not been like he was exactly waiting for Draco to turn to their side, but the kidnapping had raised questions in his mind.

"You say that he's on our side now, and yet I don't quite believe that." Travis looked at him for a second.

"Harry, are you familiar with the muggle film The Dirty Dozen?" A film from 1966 that was kind of the template for modern action films.

"Yeah, Rick and Terry made me watch it once.....they're two of my roommates, the ones I don't usually hang out with. What about it?"

"You remember the concept? Twelve men who face either prison or fighting that battle? Well it's the same with Draco, he just anticipated the choice he had to make and brought it up first. When your friends

turn on you, you generally go seek accommodation with your enemies.” Harry was shaking his head.

“I think we would all be better off if he was in Azkaban, and his mommy too, and I would have advised you so in advance if I could have. I only did this because you asked me to, and to prove that I’m not totally unreasonable.” Rufus gave him his best politician smile.

“And that will be remembered Harry, believe me.” It bloody well better be, thought Harry, who was already planning to figure out a way around the Oath, for contingencies of course. Yep.

“You two are really comfortable with a werewolf running loose inside that school? I mean Remus is one thing, but Draco?” Both Rufus and Travis grimaced slightly, and The Minister answered.

“No, but sometimes comfort has to be sacrificed. Lupin and Dumbledore will keep him in check.”

“And if they can’t?”

“Both of them have Avada Kedavra privileges if the need arises, werewolves can’t withstand the Killing Curse anymore than a muggle or one of us. Well except you of course, but those circumstances were rather extraordinary, as I’m sure you would agree.”

“Well I’m not eager to try it again if that’s what you’re asking sir.”

“Can’t say I blame you there Harry.” Harry now steered the conversation in another direction.

“How easily did the others agree to this?” Travis smiled.

“Your other friends? Ginny and Hermione agreed right away, while Neville clearly didn’t like it, and Ron flat out said that you would never agree to it. Well you and the twins, we all assume that you speak for them and vice versa.”

“That last part is true enough. This hasn’t gone public yet? Has Lucius not noticed the money being gone?”

“Apparently not, Narcissa sent a message to Voldemort saying that she was going abroad for a couple of weeks to visit some old friends from school. She has no duties there, so it was that easy. There has been no word, officially or unofficially from Lucius or Voldemort, so we can take that as we will.”

“You questioned both of them? Narcissa and Draco?”

“We did, under Veritaserum for them both, each interrogation took a long, long time over many days. Very fascinating I don’t mind telling you Harry. If you like, we can get you a transcript.” A fatter bone had never been put in front of any greyhound dog at the track, and Harry snapped it up.

“Yes sir, if you would please. Just get it to the twins and they’ll send it on over to me.” Rufus nodded that he would do just that.

“A few other pieces of news for you. You mentioned coming back over for a Fudge trial, well that won’t happen, but another nemesis of yours might be coming to trial before Spring is over.” Harry’s curiosity was aroused.

“Who?”

“Dolores Umbridge.” We have just lost cabin pressure.....and Harry’s mind turned inside out as every possible facial expression was viewed by Rufus and Travis. When he regained the power of rational speech:

“I thought she was in St. Mungos?”

“She is, and the doctors are very pleased with her progress. They anticipate her being released sometime toward the end of April.” And it wasn’t even Harry’s birthday.

“And you’ll bring her to trial? On what charges?”

“Yes she is going to trial, as soon as she is declared competent to do so. Even Fudge was adamant about that, if you can believe it. What will she be charged with? Everything from attempted use of an Unforgivable to the use of that quill on your hand, to.....well you get the picture. You and your former schoolmates will be key witnesses, and that includes Draco Malfoy.” Harry was fighting off the drool of happiness, and badly wanted to act his age right now, but held off somehow, knowing he had to impress The Minister.

“How much Azkaban time are we talking about for her?” Rufus was tempted to say ‘death by firing squad’ just to see what Harry’s reaction would be. He hadn’t had this much fun in weeks, this kid was pretty fascinating.

“Probably 25 years if convicted on all counts. In other words, a life sentence. Someone her age is not going to last all that time there. You need to be young, powerful, and healthy going in, like Black and the Lestranges, or any of the three of us if it came to it. Umbridge is none of those things Harry, I doubt if she makes it five years.” Harry wondered at something though.

“Will The Wizengamot go all strange on us the way they did with Snape though?”

“The Wizengamot is now a much changed body of lawmakers and jurors Harry, if you don’t mind me saying. By the time the trial hits, the body will be at 40 people, full capacity.”

“And your appointees are all your people I take it?” Rufus just chuckled.

“ Well they are more in sympathy with my views than, say, Dumbledore’s, the new members anyway. I vetted them very, very carefully Harry. Remember with Snape, Dumbledore brought every pressure to bear that he could with them. He called in a lot of chits, and even then he barely avoided Azkaban time for Snape. For all the

good it wound up doing them, and the favor bank is now pretty low indeed.”

“Are you going to have him replaced as Head?”

“Not anytime soon Harry, being Head keeps him involved and somewhat out of the way. Between the administrative duties he has as Head, his Hogwarts position, and the Order, it gets him out of my hair. If it comes to it though, I have your friend Arthur Weasley ready to take over.” Harry wasn’t so sure about that one, next thing you know Rufus would suggest that Arthur succeed him as Minister. He gave hesitant voice to his misgivings.

“Arthur? As Head of the Wizengamot? I love the man like an uncle, but isn’t that kind of a stretch?”

“Not really, he has a lot of personal popularity within our community, and Head is a consensus building job.”

“Hugh Grant has a lot of popularity in the muggle world, I don’t see anyone proposing him for Prime Minister.” Love Actually being six and a half years in the movie future.

“Not yet. Wasn’t the muggle American President Ronald Reagan formerly an actor?” So Ziegler had mentioned more than once in class.

“Point taken. I repeat my question: At what juncture does Dumbledore get the boot? Don’t get me wrong, I’ll be popping a cork on a bottle of sparkling cider when it happens.”

“Like I said Harry, it probably won’t happen anytime soon. A combination of age, and several discussions we have had, have succeeded in putting him in his proper place.”

“And me turning on him like I did.” Not a question, and Rufus did him the courtesy of not sugar-coating it.

“Yes, that was probably what started him down this road. I wouldn’t have had the leverage I had if you hadn’t struck first, and I hope I don’t sound insincere when I thank you for that. Oh Fudge and Umbridge did their damage, but all that did was strengthen his resolve to keep on fighting. You though Harry, you started giving him pause.”

“Do you think I was right Minister?” He knew that Travis thought so, but he wanted to hear what The Minister thought. Rufus did not disappoint.

“For the most part, yes. If I was sitting in your trainers.....I probably would have decamped, though I probably would have just gone across the sea to Ireland perhaps. The Michael Collins School is a fine one, tiny though it is.” That thought had never even occurred to Harry, and if it had to Peter Tyson, the solicitor had never mentioned it. The Michael Collins School was just 75 students, and generally admitted only kids living in Ireland, or Irish immigrants in Great Britain. Seamus Finnegan’s mother was related to someone there, and she had flat out refused to let him go to school there, though Seamus had not put out the entire story behind it.

“Harry, you didn’t turn on Dumbledore, he turned on you, a long time ago. Yes, his decisions were made with the best intentions, but that’s what the road to hell is paved with, if you believe that old saying.” Harry’s next question caught them both by surprise.

“Have I burned my bridges back there?” Four eyebrows were raised.

“Are you considering returning?”

“Not until July, 1998 at the earliest, but you can never start planning too early for these kinds of things.” Rufus got up and started walking around the room.

“No you can’t Harry, and I’m pleased to see how forward thinking you are now. It’s a tangle really, if you look at it dispassionately. Would you have garbage thrown at you in Diagon Alley? No, remember that the twins’ shop does great business there and

everyone knows you're their moneyman. Would you still be the number one choice in the Quidditch Draft? Yes, assuming Voldemort is dealt with by then. Is the public split on you? Also yes. You have to decide from there if that means you still have bridges, and how many. I should tell you this, don't go to Hogwarts and ask about the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, the faculty there are pretty set against you, Remus excluded, and it would be his job you would be taking anyway." That meant Flitwick had turned on him, and while Harry wasn't shocked, he was very disappointed.

"The Howler campaign probably did me no favors there."

"No it did not, as amusing as it was. Thank you for not sending any my way."

"No problem, and no, I never really considered it. I have another question, and I promise that for my part, I won't tell anyone your answer, if you choose to answer it."

"Sounds like this will be a good one, fire away."

"Have you considered the possibility of a negotiated peace with Voldemort?" Clary's question at the first Commission meeting had given him the idea. Rufus had not expected this, and debated with himself for a few seconds on just how much to tell Harry. He finally decided that Harry had been so cooperative that he had to do something for the kid.

"I have not, no. Fudge did, however, and he had representatives meet with Pettigrew and Nott on the sly. This was before we knew that Fudge was in their employ obviously, it was back in April, before your shindig at the Department of Mysteries."

"And nothing came of it?"

"Oh we got some demands. One demand if truth be told: Unconditional surrender." Harry waited for more, but that was the answer.

“That’s it? A bit unrealistic I should think.”

“Oh there was one condition: Those of us unwilling to swear allegiance to Voldemort would be allowed to forfeit their possessions and leave the country, within 24 hours of said surrender.” Harry had a nice laugh at that one.

“I’m sure that would have gone over big if Fudge had presented it to the people.”

“He did push for further negotiations, but when Amelia threatened to disembowel him he gave up.”

“Now that is a sight I would pay some galleons to see.”

“Travis here begged her to do it just for our amusement, but she claimed she was only bluffing anyway. Fudge was rather scared of Amelia, though he would never admit it.” Travis, who had said little lately in the conversation, was now snickering.

“Would you re-open negotiations?”

“Not right now I wouldn’t Harry, for the simple fact that we seem to be winning. We won The Battle of Hogsmeade Village in a rout, we basically fought to a draw at the trial, and got rid of Fudge in the bargain. That alone was something of a victory, even I hadn’t assumed his job. The werewolves got a pasting in Hogsmeade, and now it looks like they’ve turned on the Death Eaters. The two Malfoys will be a major coup when it gets leaked, probably by the Death Eaters to exploit Draco’s new state of body. And you have Voldemort’s wand. Now he may not need it for most things, but you have gotten some nice use out of it, and the Priori Incantatem effect is now nullified. How’s that wand working for you anyway?”

“Just like my old one, no difference.”

“Usually we frown on a Wizard or Witch having two wands, we won’t let Ollivander sell a second one. But given that you are not,

technically in our jurisdiction at the moment, and that you won yours as a prize of battle besides.....well let's just say that we'll have no official comment." Rufus was smiling that easy smile of his, and he was winning Harry over just like the plan intended.

"I'm sure I'll need it at the end."

"So you agree that you will have to fight Voldemort to end the war? I was under the impression that you disagreed with the so-called Prophecy that Dumbledore holds so dear."

"I don't believe in it, no."

"Then we're talking revenge for your parents?"

"For the most part, and the fact that Voldemort won't let it go like this. He wants to face me, to finish what he couldn't 15 ½ years ago." Rufus asked something that he and his advisors had been long wondering.

"Has he extended the hand of friendship to you?"

"Not since the incident with The Philosopher's Stone in first year. I turned him down then, and would do the same now, no hesitation. Or do you not believe that?"

"I believe you Harry, don't worry, no need for any truth ensuring potions. I have your measure, and I believe you have mine. We're on the same side here."

"Yes we are Minister. Do I sense another invite to join The League?" Harry wondered if Travis had told his mentor that it had been his sage advice that convinced Harry not to join The League. He doubted it.

"Would you like one? Perhaps a sweetener can be offered to help convince you."

“Such as?” Rufus did not change expression with his next words, astounding though they turned out to be.

“Five minutes alone in a room with Dolores Umbridge after her trial and sentencing, and before her transport to Azkaban. No wands, no physical contact.....but you are taking a Wandless Magic course here aren't you? I'm sure you could think of some ways to pass the time.”

Harry had no idea on how to react here, and to give him time to think:

“Is this a test or something sir? How moral is young Harry Potter?”

“No Harry, this is not a test. Merely an offer made out of mutual loathing for a rotten person. I could make a similar offer to any one of three or four dozen Ministry employees, and former Ministry employees.” True enough, Umbridge had not be too discriminate in her targets.

Harry's mind was racing, if he took Rufus up on it, he would have three months at least to practice. Five glorious minutes, 300 seconds of revenge. But what would the others say? How could he face them if they found out he had been allowed to torture someone who was helpless against him. How could he live with himself for that matter? Wouldn't he just be Tom Riddle Jr. after that? He had hurt that Lycan, but only after the guy had shot him, bullets bouncing off or not. He looked at them both:

“I'm sorry Minister, but that's too far even for me. I appreciate the thought, and I badly want to do it.....but I just can't. I would enjoy it at the time, but afterwards.....I don't know if there are enough showers to rub that dirt off me Look, I'll join The League when summer comes, and I'll trust you to reward me for it later on.” Travis breathed an obvious sigh of relief, and The Minister smiled at them both.

“Fair enough Harry, and for my part, I'm glad that you chose that route.”

“Yet you made the offer.”

“I do plenty of things I don’t want to do Harry, it’s called being a responsible adult. You know what I’m talking about as well as anyone, 16 years old or not. I made the offer because you deserved your chance at revenge on her for what she did to you, but yes, I was hoping you would decline it.”

“Will you make that offer to someone else now?” An enigmatic look flashed over Rufus’ face.

“Who says I haven’t already? You’re not her most wronged victim Harry. I know that last year was hell for you, and the scars on your hand will never fade.....but she destroyed a lot of people. I’ve got a few people chewing on it, people who have had most of their morals surgically removed by Umbridge and Fudge. Part of my new reconciliation program if you will.”

“Was she one of Voldemort’s people?”

“Not so far as we can tell. There are many different kinds of evil, and not all of them can coexist. We won’t know until she’s sane enough to question under Veritaserum, but there’s no evidence so far that she’s a Death Eater or a sympathizer. She has no Mark, though that doesn’t mean much. Draco and Narcissa didn’t have them either. Now Travis and I have to get going, we have a meeting in Australia tomorrow with Prime Minister Thorpe, and that’s a long trip, even by portkey. I have one more thing to show you, more of a humor thing than we’ve talked about.” Rufus pulled a magazine out of his robe pocket and slid it over. It was The Journal for Obscure Creatures. Harry and Drew had made the cover, posing next to their Four Tooth Gimmerslammer. The caption was:

Boy Who Lived and Friend Find Rare Creature on Hike

“Oh my.”

“It’s an advance copy, Lovegood got me one when I told him I was coming over here.”

“You two have contact?” Another surprise was uttered.

“Oh sure, we were roommates in school. A bit off at times, but a helluva nice guy. He told me to tell you that it hits the newsstands on Friday, if you want your twin friends to get you some more copies. Luna wrote the article, she’s a better writer than her father even, but don’t tell anyone I said that.” Harry was just shaking his head as he quickly scanned the article, it was pure Luna. Rufus brought his attention back off of the magazine.

“When do you think you’ll be on our side of the pond next? Not counting any Umbridge trial of course.” Harry thought for a couple of seconds.

“Beats me, sometime in July probably. School here gets out the last full week in June, I don’t have a calendar in my stuff or else I would check.”

“Plenty of time to set something up. We’ll schedule the trial for about a month after Umbridge gets out of the hospital, we have a lot of questioning to do of her, and that will take some time. I’ll send you an owl when we set the trial, and I’ll sort things out with your Professor Murray to get you over there.”

“Another trial I’ll miss class for, I hope it’s not as exciting as the last one.”

“It won’t be, not in that way at least. We’ve made some plans for security.” That’s all he would say about that, and he and Travis got up and came around to shake hands.

“It was good to finally get a chance to talk with you Harry, very enlightening.”

“Same here Minister, it seems that Travis sung your praises with some justification.” Rufus looked over at his protégé with some amusement.

“He exaggerates. See you around Harry.”

“You too sir.” The two men left, and Harry gathered up his things slowly, waiting for them to go upstairs. Once he was sure they were gone, he went over to Riley Poole’s basement lair and knocked on the door. He was admitted with a shout. Poole was tinkering with a tetchy computer on his workbench.

“I was down here for a meeting, and I thought I’d give you your salary a little early.” He handed over a wad of \$20 bills. Poole pocketed the money with a satisfied smile.

“Thanks, down here meeting with your fellow Brits? I heard them talking as they came down.”

“Yeah, our Minister and Head Auror.”

“You have important friends.”

“So I’m told. Anything to report?”

“Only that your buddy Lyman and his new friend Ziegler are unhappy at how the school defense is being gone about.”

“Unhappy on the sly, or in front of Murray and Heyman?”

“Both for now, or at least they’ve made Murray aware of it. They bypass Heyman on most issues as it is.” Poole had told Harry of the general feeling amongst the faculty for Heyman, that they felt that he thought more like a bureaucrat now than an educator, though only Ripley and Greenleaf seemed to dislike him on a personal level. Poole was essentially Harry’s inside man with the faculty, not that Harry was planning any insurrections or anything of the like, but he did feel that he was better off knowing what was going on with those people. Poole seemed to get a kick out of sharing this kind of stuff with him as well, and he was a well-worth-\$200 per month fountain of information on the inner workings of the school.

“Keep me apprised on that if you don’t mind.”

“Sure thing. Any pranks you have planned that I should know about?”

“We’re kicking things around right now, maybe a belated christening for the new location. After we decide on something, you’ll be the next to know.”

“Cool, it’ll be interesting to see what you guys come up with.”

They chatted for another few minutes, and then Harry took his leave. He and Poole always wound up shooting the shit on these little visits. Dobby could very easily have made the fee deliveries, but Harry had decided early on that the personal touch might work better here, and he had been proven correct, as he and Poole had gotten along rather well. Harry told the gang that perhaps the Caretaker’s irritability was due more to students looking down on him from jump, rather than the other way around. Warrick had responded that perhaps Harry just naturally identified with the outsider, and Poole was relating to that. Both ideas were likely true. He put Britain and its people in the rear of his mind for a couple of days, until the shit hit the fan with Draco.

Thursday, February 27, 1997

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton

11:30 am GMT

Voldemort and Bella were in his study, going over plans for Grimmauld Place, when Lucius Malfoy came hurrying into the room, followed closely by an out of breath Pettigrew.

“My Lord, I have been robbed.” Both of them looked at him with irritation, and Voldemort responded.

“What the hell are you babbling about Malfoy?”

“My vault at Gringotts has been looted. Narcissa has absconded with the entire cash load.” Okay, this was bad, as Bella went very pale at hearing this news.

“Start from the beginning Lucius. When did you discover this?”

“About 90 minutes ago My Lord. I went to the bank, in disguise of course, to withdraw some galleons to pay for our informants. I went into the vault and it was empty, not one Knut. I queried the goblin in charge of our account, and he said that Narcissa had transferred the money to a new vault less than two weeks ago. He refused to give me any information on the account, saying that my name was not on it, and he would not tell me whose was.”

“I take it you took a stroll over to Malfoy Manor?”

“I tried my Lord, but the floo has been disconnected, and it has been placed under Fidelius. She has betrayed us my Lord.” Bella just sat there, petrified that Voldemort was somehow going to blame her for this mess.....and she was not far off the truth. He turned toward her, his longtime ally and private ‘confidant’.

“Bella, any insight you would like to share with us perhaps?” She thought quickly, and said the first thing that came to mind.

“It must have something to do with Draco my Lord. Perhaps he cut a deal with Dumbledore and forced her to go with him. I know she would chose her son over him.” She pointed derisively as Lucius, she had never liked this man, she found him both physically and socially beneath the Blacks.

“You half crazed harpy, it was your sister who betrayed us!” Bella far outstripped, no pun intended, her brother-in-law in fighting ability, and before Voldemort could stop her, she whipped out her wand at a pace that Harry would smile at:

“CRUCIO!”

Right between the eyes. Voldemort let it continue for a few seconds, and then motioned with his hand for her to stop. She did, and Malfoy just lay on the ground twitching and gasping. Pettigrew took it upon himself to condescendingly offer to help Malfoy up.

“Do you need any assistance Lucius? You look a little shook up.” Voldemort was amused by this, the whole point of the exercise, and lazily said:

“Enough Wormtail. Lucius, watch your tongue when talking with your betters. You should have kept better control of your wife, as a proper husband should.” Lucius needed a minute to catch his breath, and when he did:

“She never gave the slightest indication of betraying us my Lord.” Actually, Voldemort believed him, he didn’t think that Lucius’ wayward wife was a talented enough actress to dupe them all.

“Push your recent conversations to the front of your mind Lucius, and I will have a look for myself.” Malfoy did as ordered, this kind of thing happening before, and Voldemort reached out a hand:

“Legilimens”

The bad man took his time and went through all of the recent encounters between the two Malfoys, verbal and otherwise, and found that yes, in fact, Lucius had been correct in his assessment. There was no indication, subtle or otherwise, that suggested a cause for what had just happened. He turned to Bella.

“Bella, if you will.” She had anticipated this already.

“I’m ready Master.”

He did the same with her, again, nothing. Lucius had been out of town of course, and Bella had not seen her sister since the arrival of Andromeda’s note. Both Bella and Lucius were still afraid of retribution, while Pettigrew was enjoying the peace of mind of one

who knows that whatever screw-up just happened, he wasn't going to be blamed for it.

“Bella, I think you need to pay a visit to your other sister. I think she will be able to tell you what we need to know.” Bella didn't say anything at first, muggle-lover or not, Andromeda was still her sister.

“Yes my Lord.”

“There's no need to hurt her if you don't wish to Bella, I know that you're squeamish in that one particular area, and I don't mind. She is family after all, and I don't let my pathetic excuse for one intrude on what tiny amount of compassion I'm capable of. Just get the information we need and come back. Go now.” The right buttons being pushed of course, Voldemort was very good with his people when the mood suited him.

“ Yes my Lord.” Bella, amazed that she had not been punished.....yet, quickly left the room and portkeyed away.

“Lucius, I will send for you when Bella comes back, and we will then decide on what to do here. Dismissed.” Lucius bowed, but there was a strange look in his eyes that flashed there, and Pettigrew's wand came up.

“Stupefy!”

Malfoy slumped to the floor, and a very impressed Voldemort looked at his lackey.

“Very good Wormtail, I saw it too. Whatever information Bella comes back with, Malfoy is useless without his money. He's Snape without any potions talents, just a bungler.”

“What do you think happened my Lord?” Voldemort had long ago discovered that Pettigrew was a good sounding board, the man was intelligent and powerful, but not so intelligent and powerful that he would consider, or be capable of, a coup.

“I think Bella was correct, young Malfoy has gone to the other side.”

“Is he now a werewolf?”

“Can you think of anything else that would make him turn? Draco was the leader of the next generation of Death Eaters if he had stayed ‘untouched’. He would certainly not have that prominence on Potter’s side, and young Malfoy wants to be the center of attention.”

“Are they that desperate that they would risk housing a werewolf in Hogwarts?”

“Yes Wormtail, they are just that desperate. And we can use this to our advantage. Let’s see what Bella comes back with.” They talked of other matters for a couple of minutes, occasionally loosing a two to three second burst of Crucio at Lucius, just for kicks. Bella came back after about 10 minutes.

“There is no one at the Tonks house my Lord, it has been abandoned. They live in a muggle neighborhood and there is a ‘For Sale’ sign in the front yard. I used a muggle telephone and spoke to the realtor handing the sale, and he said that the Tonks family is out of town and cannot be reached.” Voldemort turned immediately to Pettigrew.

“Wormtail, visit our man at The Daily Prophet and leak the story about Draco being a werewolf. Have him cite ‘family sources’ in the article, that will cast some suspicion on Bella’s sister, perhaps that will be to our advantage. Then I want you both to go to that realtor’s office and check for any contact information you can find. Make sure you get a hair from his desk as well, we may need to send someone in under Polyjuice.”

“Yes my Lord. And him?” Voldemort paused for a moment.

“I will deal with him for the time being, but he will stay alive for now. But let this be understood, he is now nothing more than a foot soldier. His portfolio will be transferred to someone else later today, and he will no longer give any orders. His financial network has been rolled

up, and he's now broke, his only value is in his casting of the Killing Curse at my command."

"Yes my Lord, we will go at once." The two left the study, and their tasks were completed within two hours. The realtor had nothing but a post office box address for the Tonks family, and no contact phone number, just as he had said. Voldemort modified Lucius' memory enough to make him a good soldier again, and the blonde haired one was not going to be joining his wife anytime soon, unless it was in death. The article in The Daily Prophet ran two days later.

Saturday, March 1, 1997

Hogwarts Great Hall

Breakfast

The headline of The Daily Prophet entranced everyone in the room

Draco Malfoy a Werewolf? Is Hogwarts Hiding a Monster?

Daily Prophet Publisher Augustus McCrae, who we have established is no friend to Dumbledore, had not asked for comment before running the story, so it caught the Hogwarts faculty totally by surprise. After everyone took in the headline, the room exploded into a large shouting match, as Draco walked over to the faculty table as casually as he could, as every eye in the room went to him. The DOM crew, Luna had been allowed in on the Oaths after a direct request from Neville, all tried to look like this was news to them as well. In retrospect only Ron, whose usual facial expression was kind of slack anyway, was totally convincing.....but nobody was looking at the five anyway. Dumbledore knew that he had to nip this in the bud now, or there would be a riot on his hands, and he liked the odds of 275 odd students against his faculty.

"EVERYONE QUIET!"

He put a little anger in his voice, dearly hoping it would shock them into complying. It did to a point, as the students kept to their seats

and were reduced to some angry muttering. What to do now though? He could always deny the article, he had speed-read it sufficiently to see that it was merely speculation, with no actual proof attached. But there was one small problem: If the student body ever found out that he lied to them about something this big, he would never recover their trust, which had already been noticeably weakened by Harry's departure and subsequent salvos.

Draco sidled up to Dumbledore and said in a low voice:

"Well? We knew this was coming. Father must have found the empty vault."

"Are you ready for your unveiling Draco? Like you said, we knew this was coming."

"I had hoped it would last a little longer, but go ahead and make the announcement." Dumbledore looked at the other teachers, all of whom agreed with this. The old man knew he had to keep the lid on, and the muttering was growing inexorably louder with every second. Without *Sonorus*, he addressed them:

"If I can have everyone's attention please!" The muttering died down, and everyone looked up at the faculty tables, the glares being split between Dumbledore and Draco.

"Last month, Draco Malfoy was kidnapped. You all know this. He was not kidnapped by his father's associates, but by werewolves. His captors tortured him, and bit him multiple times. He went through a terrible ordeal, and has come out of it a different person, very different." He paused to take a breath, and the lid stayed on while he did. They were all, even Draco and the faculty, waiting to see what he said next.

"Draco has chosen to take a new path in his life, a life free of evil and darkness. Yes, he is a werewolf, just like Professor Lupin. And like Professor Lupin, he has made the choice to fight for what is good and right in our world. He has made mistakes in the past, and I am not so much an obfuscator as to say that he has asked for

forgiveness for them, but he has asked for the chance to prove that he can change. I, and the Ministry, have agreed to give him that chance. I ask the same of you.” Very few, save most Ravenclaws and Hermione, were sure of exactly what ‘obfuscator’ meant, but all of the non-Slytherins were still listening intently, as Draco’s housemates were now involved in a mass argument, though thankfully no wands had been produced..

“QUIET!” This was McGonagall, and the Slytherins mutinously quieted down a little as Shepherd also looked pointedly at them.

“Thank you Professor McGonagall. Now all of you are surely wondering why I didn’t tell you this until now, until I was compelled to. The simple reason is that I wanted to give Draco his chance at redemption in a setting that was less, how should I say, public. He has passed every test thus far, and I have every confidence that he will continue to do so. I ask you to put the past aside, and accept Draco as he is now. Any questions that you may have, please feel free to see your Head of House, or myself or Professor Lupin. Slytherin House, if you will remain after the meal, we have things to discuss. Thank you.” He sat back down, and tried very hard, successfully, to look relaxed. Draco was ballsy, even in his new guise as ‘good guy’, but he wasn’t about to go back to his table. He lingered at the end of the table, speaking quietly with Remus. Dumbledore, noting this, murmured to McGonagall next to him:

“Send two faculty members to each House after the meal, the Head and one other. The rest are to remain here, including Remus. When you get to your office, have Amelia send a detail of Aurors here to the Great Hall, just in case we need them.”

“You think the Slytherins will try something?”

“I would be mildly surprised if they started anything violent, but only mildly. Leave now if you please Minerva.” She did, and walked very slowly out of the Great Hall, through the teacher entrance to the room. The slowly part ended as soon as the door was closed, as she ran to the nearest floo and got in touch with Amelia Bones. Bones had anticipated a firestorm at Hogwarts, and 20 Aurors were ready to be

dispatched. They came streaming through the floor a couple of minutes later, and were waiting outside the teacher entrance to the Great Hall while the students were filing out.

The muttering had started at the other tables again, with the Gryffindors now arguing about how to respond. Jack Sloper, the Head Boy, was trying to keep control, aided by his fellow seventh year Prefect Katie Bell, but the din was growing louder as the meal wound down. The DOM's at the table looked uncertain of what to do, Ron and Hermione were not assisting their older Prefect brethren in trying to quiet things down, nor was fifth year Prefect Ginny. Neville finally came to a decision that if he was going to 'forgive' Draco, he might as well go whole hog and do the job right. He got up from his place at the table, squeezed Luna's hand at her place at Ravenclaw, and walked up to Draco and Remus at the faculty table. He said loudly.

"Welcome to the other side Draco." His voice rang throughout the Great Hall, and all talking stopped. Draco had abused no one more than Neville Longbottom during his first five years at school, and had only stopped this school year because of Voldemort's explicit orders. He replied just as loudly.

"Thanks Neville, it's good to be here." He reached out his hand to Neville, this time publicly, and Neville shook it firmly. Neville's lips barely moved as he said next:

"Good luck." Draco nodded back with a faint smile, and slightly turned his head so that the rest of the room could not see.

"Thank you for that Longbottom, you could have handled this a lot differently." Neville smiled back, just as faintly, and left the Great Hall. Next were Draco's other favorite targets, Ron and Hermione, as they repeated Neville's gesture, as did Luna and Ginny seconds later. This went a long way toward easing tension within Gryffindor, as while not all of them shook Draco's hand, most of them acknowledged him in some manner. The Hufflepuffs, long a target of his derision, including this year, left the Great Hall pretty quietly. Ravenclaw House, generally the smartest of the bunch, knew that they were a likely

destination for Draco in the coming hours, and so detailed Head Girl Cho Chang and her fellow seventh year Prefect Dirk Struan to stay behind and represent their House in the coming debate with Slytherin.

Ten minutes after Neville's gesture, the room was reduced to Slytherin, the two Ravenclaws, and the Dumbledore and Remus led faculty. McGonagall and Hill had gone with Gryffindor, Sprout and Hagrid had gone with Hufflepuff, and Vector and Flitwick with Ravenclaw. Shepherd and Sinistra were the only Slytherin alumni on the faculty, and they were seen as the teachers with the most sway over the more hardcore members of Slytherin. There were 62 kids in Slytherin, the smallest of the Houses, and Dumbledore had never asked Shepherd for a rundown on their various loyalties, a bit of admitted head-in-the-sand disease on his part, but one he acknowledged. Shepherd had decided it was worthwhile to make such an analysis, but had told McGonagall that he would only show it to Dumbledore, and even then only if the Headmaster asked for it. McGonagall had tried to force it out of him, but he simply yawned at her and walked away.

The room was now quiet as Dumbledore, Remus, and Shepherd stood before them, the other faculty spread carefully around the Slytherin table. Draco stood apart at the faculty table, and though he looked calm, was very worried inside. He carefully eyed Theo Nott, who was now most likely to take over the leadership of the Dark Slytherins. Draco's wand was still in his pocket, but he made sure his right hand was hanging right near it.

"All right now, I'm sure you have some questions as to how this affects you, and I will do my best to answer them. Mister McCauley, I believe we should start with you, do you have anything to say?" Neil McCauley was the seventh year Prefect, and while it was assumed he was pro-Dark, he had never given any indication either way. His parents both worked at Gringotts, and traveled abroad frequently on business for the bank, the perfect cover for agents of Voldemort.. He got up and walked toward Dumbledore and Remus.

"You've really forsaken You Know Who?" Addressed to Draco obviously.

“I have.”

“And this newspaper story is correct? You’re a werewolf?”

“Unfortunately.” They waited for more, but Malfoy was wary of saying too much.

“Are you going to murder us or bite us while we sleep?”

“Nope, that is not an option as far as I’m concerned Neil.”

“Then I could give a shit to be frank with you Headmaster, this has nothing to do with me.” He sat back down, and next up was Lyla Garrity, the other seventh year Prefect. She was considered not to be a Dark sympathizer.

“I’m sorry Neil, but I have to disagree. Things are too fragile in our House to allow someone this polarizing to live there. If he stays, there’ll be a civil war in Slytherin before the day is over. I’m sorry Draco, I’m sympathetic to your situation, but you have to go.” Sixth year Prefect Pansy Parkinson didn’t bother to stand, she just looked at her erstwhile crush.

“Traitor.” Nothing more really needed to be said there, and Draco did not show a reaction. Theo Nott was next, and he very calmly stated his position. He was his father’s son.

“I understand that you feel you had no choice Draco, and I agree that He Who Must Not Be Named would not have taken you back. But your new views do not mesh with ours in the sixth year room any longer, and we can’t risk touching off a battle right there in our dorm. You need to be re-sorted.” The fifth year Prefects, Allegra Tomba and Tyler Brock, felt much the same way. They weren’t unsympathetic to Draco’s new situation, but wanted him and his problems out of Slytherin House. Dumbledore then turned to Ravenclaw’s Chang and Struan.

“Miss Chang? You and Mr. Struan have correctly assumed that a re-sorting might be necessary. What are your views?” Quite frankly, Cho was in agreement with Neil McCauley. She assumed that Draco had somehow satisfied Dumbledore and the Ministry with assurances of his new loyalty, and that was enough for her. She didn’t much care otherwise, and even thought that Draco would help them win the House Cup, Ravenclaw had a decent sized lead over Gryffindor at present.

“The Sorting Hat is not going to be involved here?”

“No Miss Chang, we cannot risk it insisting that Draco remain in Slytherin. Hufflepuff is not an option, and it is my feeling that Draco would be better suited to Ravenclaw than Gryffindor.” And it was part of the deal, though Dumbledore would never tell any of the kids about that little detail. Remus took over.

“Hogwarts by-laws allow for a re-sorting, with or without the Hat, if extraordinary circumstances require it. We the faculty agree that these are such circumstances.” He eyed Cho.

“Cho? Do you have an opinion?”

“I’m fine with re-sorting him into Ravenclaw.” She was already mentally looking forward to the enraged letter from Harry that she was positive she would get, she would teach him to have his womenfolk send her Howlers. If she only knew.

Dumbledore looked at the other Ravenclaw.

“Mister Struan?”

“I have my reservations, but I accept your assurances Headmaster.”

“Thank you both. I will not call for a vote of Slytherin House, as there seems to be a majority of the leadership there feeling the same way. Draco Malfoy, you are hereby re-sorted into Ravenclaw House. You have 15 minutes to gather your things and report to your new home. Your former Housemates will wait here with us while Professor

Lupin accompanies you. Miss Chang and Mister Struan will also go with you, for a verbal orientation to Ravenclaw. However, there is one thing I would like to say first, something I will be repeating to the other three Houses as well: There is to be no violence done in our school, period. I am not merely talking about to Mister Malfoy, I mean everyone from first to seventh years. If I find out that a student has been assaulted for any reason, the instigator will be harshly punished, up to and including expulsion and a snapping of his or her wand. If you have a non-violent dispute that cannot be solved, take it to a Prefect, your Head of House, or me.....do nothing more than that. Am I understood?" He looked sternly at Slytherin, who could do nothing else but nod in agreement, whatever they thought individually. And they had many, quite varied, thoughts on the matter.

"Mister Malfoy, please go retrieve your belongings, no one here will bother you during this process. Professor Lupin, please return here when the task is completed."

"Yes Headmaster." The four of them departed, and then Pansy Parkinson let loose, something she had been afraid to do in front of Draco.

"How is it that you let that animal stay in school here!?"

"He is not an animal Miss Parkinson, he is a human who has been violated against his will."

"Violated into an animal." Shepherd, while getting along with Draco during his Voldemort loving days, did not care for stupidity in any form, and chose now to showcase that to his students.

"Until recently Pansy, those animals were your allies. Only when your people botched the Hogsmeade gambit did Greyback and his pack turn on you. So if you are not going to make sense when you talk, best not to open your mouth." Said very mildly in tone, but the thrust of the message got across, and Parkinson did shut up. Theo Nott, while chortling inside, was next to speak.

“Professor Shepherd is correct obviously, but what guarantees do we have that Draco won’t use his new abilities to target us?”

“He had sworn various Oaths, Mister Nott, which prohibit him from biting anyone in this building. He may fight only with his wand and his fists, and even then only to defend himself, as is the case with everyone in this castle, per my new regulations.”

“He will find a way around them, if anyone is capable of that, Draco is.”

“Yet you did not seem so concerned with his deviousness when the two of you were on the same side in the war.”

“No I did not, but he could not turn Granger or Weasley into a werewolf then could he? As far as I’m concerned Headmaster, that’s a fate worse than death.”

“Yet Draco has not chosen to commit suicide.” Nott chuckled wryly, while he loathed what Dumbledore stood for on principle, he quite liked the man in spite of it all.

“Oh please Headmaster. Draco is now the number one target of every Death Eater out there, more so even than yourself or Potter. They see you as being marginalized by Scrimgeour, and they’re almost as afraid of Potter as they are of He Who Must Not Be Named himself. Every time Malfoy sets foot outside this castle, his life is in serious danger. That sounds like a death wish to me.”

“He is prepared to assume the risks Mister Nott, that is his choice.”

“And you are risking all of our lives by acceding to his choice.”

“No I’m not, I’m betting my own life before everyone else’s.” Theo appeared to give up at that point, figuring that Dumbledore would never give in.

Meanwhile, on the way to Slytherin House:

“We should probably talk Quidditch, that’s the big question a lot of the House will be talking about right off the bat.”

“I’ve thought about that Chang.....err, Cho. Unless there’s a Chaser you’re dying to replace, I would be content to mark you in practice on the reserve squad. I’ll use that as a springboard to go for Seeker come the fall.” Cho and Dirk, who was a Beater on the squad himself, both reacted in surprise to that bit of diplomacy.

“Try not to let your chins scrape the ground too much. I know the Captain of the team isn’t going to let me tryout for her own spot, credit me that much.” Cho laughed a little, and Remus was smiling behind them.

“Good point. There are a couple of Chasers that I wouldn’t mind giving a kick in the ass to now that you mention it, the Gryffindors did outscore us with the Quaffle, badly. We have practice this afternoon at 3:00 pm, be there.”

“I will be. What about the sixth year guys situation?” Dirk knew those guys best.

“Well you never really targeted any of them, which will go a long way for you in there. I think they’ll be standoff-ish at first while they figure the new ‘you’ out. You’ll help with the House Cup that’s for sure. With you in our House, and Potter not in Gryffindor, all we need is one more Quidditch win to pretty much lock it up.”

“If I could only see the look on Harry’s face when he finds this out.” Cho was giggling with a lot of now-unrepressed glee. Draco shared a look with Remus.

“Well Cho, full disclosure and all.....Potter knows all about this.” Cho stopped dead in her tracks, and Remus almost ran into her.

“He does? How?”

“Potter promising not to sneak back in here and kill me for past events was part of the agreement I made with Dumbledore and Bones.” Cho was stunned.

“He agreed to that? Really?”

“The Minister himself persuaded him. You remember the old man announcing that all Weasley products were now off the banned list?” Cho looked like she was about to smack herself on the side of the head.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. I just thought it was because of the twins’ Order work.” Remus had felt the same way, and had queried his boss on why two loyal members like Fred and George had not had their products’ ban lifted. Dumbledore had replied simply that the twins had not asked of him, and that that is all they had needed to do. Since the question had been asked after Harry’s departure, Remus had not believed that answer for a second. Draco now confirmed that theory.

“If that was the case, the ban never would have been there in the first place. Potter demanded it of them I’m sure, and probably a few other things. I’m only telling you all of this because I want to get off on the right foot with my new Housemates, and I figure that being honest with you on this will help accomplish this.” Struan was quite impressed, and so was Cho, even as she was disappointed in no bad Harry reaction.

“Oh well, you can’t have everything.” They had now arrived at the Slytherin Common Room, and Cho and Dirk were very interested to get their first looks at it. Even as Head Girl, Cho had never been invited in here, and Remus could count his lifetime visits on both of his hands as well. Draco disappeared into the sixth year boys’ room, and within five minutes, had his trunks, both of them, levitating behind him. His new wand was a little different than his old one, which was sitting on Fenrir Greyback’s trophy case at present, but Draco had proved there not only is there more than one way to skin a cat, there’s more than one wand in Ollivander’s to fit someone.

“I’m ready, that’s it.” Remus looked a little uncomfortable here, Dumbledore really should have sent Theo Nott with them.

“I’m sorry Draco, but I do have to check your things to make sure nothing of your former roommates is in there.” Draco knew there was no arguing here, and he had nothing to hide anyway.

“Go right ahead Professor.” Remus still looked somewhat embarrassed, but sifted through the two trunks over the course of the next couple of minutes, and found nothing that was liable to belong to Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, or Nott. Only Zabini was not outwardly pro-Voldemort, but he got along with the pro-Darks in his room well enough that everyone just assumed it.

“Again, I’m sorry Draco, I couldn’t have your former roommates lobbing accusations at you.”

“I understand Professor Lupin. I hope they try something like that now, then they can look like fools.” Not that Crabbe and Goyle needed any help there, but the two thugs would now be under Nott’s command and would follow orders just as they had been for years.

“Well we should get going. Take a last look.” Draco did just that, there was a lot of familiarity in this Common Room, which had been his home for a long time.

“Well it’s a brave new world isn’t it? Let’s get out of here.” They left the room, whose password Shepherd would be changing in a few minutes, in consultation with McCauley and Garrity, the seventh year Prefects.

A few minutes later they came up to the Ravenclaw Common Room.

“Carpe Diem.” Seize the day, which was the current, changed every Sunday morning, password. The four of them walked up the four steps and into the Common Room. What looked like most of the House was waiting for them, as well as Professors Flitwick and Vector. Cho raised her voice to make the announcement, as Remus left Ravenclaw matters to Ravenclaw.

“As you can see, Draco Malfoy is here with his things. He has been re-sorted into Ravenclaw, the Headmaster feeling that Hufflepuff is a bad fit for him, and that we are better for Draco than Gryffindor.” A few ‘of course we are’ comments could be heard from various students, and Cho nodded in agreement with them.

“Draco is now one of us, and will be treated as such, he WAS a Slytherin, and is now a Ravenclaw. If there are any problems, see me or Dirk about it first. The Headmaster will be here at some point in the next hour to give you a speech, and I will give you a short preview: Violence is off the table, period. The gist I got was that if you willfully cause someone to end up in the Hospital Wing, you have a 50/50 chance of being told to pack up your trunk and hit the road. I happen to agree with that policy, it’s one thing for muggle kids to be able to fistfight, but we are capable of much more than they are, hence the tolerance is down. If you have a problem with this new policy, tough luck.” She looked at Struan to see if he had anything to add, and he did.

“I agree with Cho completely, with one addition. With Draco here, we will now have something of rivalry with Slytherin, as they are not likely to forget this. Never mind that they wanted him out in the first place, Slytherin House never did pride itself on being reasonable. Whatever happens, we do not want a war with any other House, at least not a literal one. Prefects, you are expected to enforce this new policy, and any laxness on your part will not be looked upon kindly. Professor Flitwick?” Flitwick was Head of House in name only really, as he was a total proponent of propping up the Head Girl and Boy, and let Cho run things for the most part. He stepped forward.

“Everyone is dismissed except for the sixth year students. Go back to your dorm rooms or stay in here, and we will call you when the Headmaster comes. Do not leave Ravenclaw until that happens, I want his zero tolerance lecture heard by everyone. Sixth year students and all Prefects, you will accompany us to the sixth year boys room. But before we go, Draco, do you wish to say anything?” He didn’t really, and was more than a little irritated at being put on the spot like that, but he took the ball and ran with it.

“I just want to say that I’m glad to be here, Ravenclaw is certainly a lot better than Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. I’ll do my best to fit in, I only ask that you give me a chance to do so. I know this is all a bit sudden, and that you did not have days to think about it like I have had, but any courtesy you give me will be appreciated.” Any politician would have been envious of the deftness and diplomacy of that statement. The sixth years followed Flitwick up to Draco’s new room, where the Charms teacher did some waving of his wand, and another bed was wedged between that of Terry Boot and Kevin Entwhistle. Draco set up his trunks beside the bed and turned to look at his new roommates. There was silence, as the 16 people in the crowded room waited for someone to say something. Draco felt that everything should have been said already, while Flitwick was privately hoping that one of the non-Cho students would take charge. Finally Anthony Goldstein, the Prefect who actually lived in the room, took charge.

“Well Draco, here we are. You already gave your spiel, and I for one am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. Welcome to Ravenclaw.” He reached out his hand and Draco shook it.

“Thanks. Look, I know how weird this is, and as odd as it is for you, its nothing compared to what I’m feeling. Let’s just concentrate on our schoolwork and the House Cup and get through the next four months and we’ll all be fine. We’re going to kick ass in Quidditch next month, since I will help Cho with the game plan if she wants, I know the weaknesses of all the Slytherin players and will happily tell you all about them.” Ravenclaw was not immune to self interest, and that went a long way with his new roommates, three of whom were on the Quidditch team as starters.

The group all took a seat, and led Draco through what would be expected of him. There were mandatory study groups in the evenings that he would be expected to attend, not ones that conflicted with Quidditch practice obviously, and there was tutoring available for his weaker subjects. Malfoy was now ranked number nine in his class, moving up one after Harry’s departure, one ahead of Neville. Ahead of him, Ravenclaw-wise, were Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot, ranked the top two in the class, and Stephen Cornfoot and Michael Corner, two

more of his new roomies. He learned that he would be required to do four hours a week of tutoring for the younger students as well, they would sort out his group the next day.

Draco was sternly told that the word 'mudblood' was not going to be tolerated, and he promised to be on his best behavior in that regard. After a little while, the room was cleared of everyone but the boys living there. The five holdovers took their new roommate through their usual routines, both morning, night, and weekends as well. They were a little wary of him, but none were hostile and all five of them spent some time filling him in. Dumbledore got to Ravenclaw last, and his zero tolerance speech lasted just a few minutes. He invited them to test him on it, he was sure that the first offenders would quite enjoy scrubbing the bathroom floors with a toothbrush every Saturday for the rest of the term.

Quidditch practice was spent with him marking Cho a little bit, and getting some time in at Chaser. He immediately decided that he was better than all three of the starters, in his own humble opinion, but said nothing out loud that would rock the boat. Cho didn't say anything to him after practice, but seemed happy to have him on board, as did the rest of his teammates. They were now one very good player stronger, and Slytherin was now weaker. The two best Seekers from last year were now out of commission. After dinner, he went to the library to study, and on a whim, plopped down at the same table as Ron and Hermione.

"Hello there fellow anti-Death Eaters." That look washed over Hermione's face.

"Malfoy, we swore not to kill you, not that we would be friends with you."

"No kidding, I was there you know. I would like to join your rogue DA." The look on Hermione's face firmly decided Draco on hitting her with things right off the bat, it was just too good a well not to keep dipping into.

“Excuse me? Why on earth do you want to do that, and why on earth would we let you?”

“I want to, because I’m sure that Potter taught you some tricks last year and I want to know them. You want me to, because I know some tricks that you don’t, and you want to learn them. No, we’re not going to be friends right away, but we can learn from each other. If I’m going to be on the ‘good’ side, I want to go all the way and get this war over as quickly as possible, so we can all go back to the way things were. Aside from me being like Lupin that is, rather a permanent condition, or so I’m told.” Hermione looked ready to argue some more, but Ron intervened.

“Fine, be at our Common Room door tomorrow at 2:00 pm. Come with Luna if she’s at Ravenclaw then. And no loony jokes either, Neville thrashed some third year jerk for doing that a couple of weeks ago while you were in that coma.” Neville had escaped punishment for it too, as Flitwick had not appreciated the ‘loony’ comment from his third year Ravenclaw, and had let Neville off with a very weak verbal rebuke.

“Ron!”

“He’s right Hermione, we should go all the way or not at all. Neville agrees with me on it.” Ron was, like Cho, privately hoping that it would send Harry over the falls if it got out that Draco was taking even a tiny bit of his place in the DOM firmament. He assumed that whatever perks Harry had screwed out of Rufus, they still wouldn’t make him like the situation.

“I’ll be there.....Ron. This is going to take some getting used to.” Yes it is, the happy couple both thought.

“Fine, I’ll talk to Ginny and smooth things over if need be. You would only be the second non-Gryffindor to join, after Luna. Are you going to join the regular DA as well?”

“At first, but only to curry favor with Chang, I need her support in my new situation. Tell me, how involved is Potter in your new group?”

That was a sticky question, since neither Ron nor Hermione were technically certain. Hermione answered, choosing honesty.

“I don’t know Draco, at least he’s not involved through the two of us. Neville and Luna appear to be in more contact than we are, and Neville in particular has a lot of new spells and tactical ideas than he ever used to. I would not be surprised if Harry was feeding them to him through letters.”

“What happened between you three? Did the two of you becoming an item really do that much damage?” Draco didn’t need to know this, but was interested the way folks are when they read a celebrity gossip rag: Schadenfraude. Hermione spotted this from the proverbial mile away.

“You have no need to know that Draco, and don’t ask again.”

“Touchy, touchy Hermione. I was only curious. It’s not like you haven’t been asked that hundreds of times this year.”

“Imagine my delight in being asked yet again.”

“Fine, fine, have it your way. See you both tomorrow.” He got up and left without another word, moving two tables over at the center of the room, where no one could sneak up on him. He buried his head in a book and barely cast another glance at the couple for the next two hours.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other darkly for a minute.

“Nothing good is going to come out of this Ron.”

“It’s not like we had a choice you know, if we had pooched that deal.....”

“We could have dug in a little, or extorted them like Harry probably did.”

“Extorted them? Who are you and where you did you kidnap Hermione to?” Said with a little bit of a smile, which was sheepishly returned.

“You know what I mean Ron. I’m just saying that I’m uncomfortable with this whole thing.”

“You think Harry and the twins agreed so easily? Just for the right to sell WWW products here?” Hermione refused to believe that it was quite that easy.

“This was Dumbledore’s big plan Ron, and Harry would only agree to back Dumbledore if it suited his own purposes.”

“You should write him and ask, or ask Ginny.”

“Ginny hasn’t gotten a letter from him since the werewolf battle.....and I just assumed you didn’t want me being so friendly with him anymore.”

“Since when has that stopped you?” This was where being a little docile got her, Hermione thought grumpily.

“I care about your feelings Ron, and I know that you and Harry are on the outs. I don’t want to do anything to drive you two further apart than you already are.” Ron had made a career lately of sidestepping that particular issue, and now was no different.

“You can be friends with whomever you want Hermione, be it Ginny, Harry, or even Draco. I know I haven’t taken that position in the past, but I don’t want you to be unhappy. I still won’t like it too much, but I want your happiness more than anything.” It was words like that which kept Hermione in love with the redheaded gump, as she could tell that he really meant them.

“I will never be friends with Draco Malfoy, you can rest assured on that score.”

“Why not? I’m not saying that’s bad mind you.”

“He switched sides because he had to Ron, not because he felt it was the right thing to do. I can’t forget five years of verbal abuse, not when he’s not even sorry. I know it seems like Neville has, but I know he hasn’t forgotten either.”

“Neither have I Hermione, trust me. I know we can’t get revenge ourselves, but maybe Bill will do something. He and I still get along pretty well, I’ll talk to him about it the next time I see him. I promise you, Draco Malfoy and I will never be friends.” Hermione decided since friendship seemed to be a theme here, she might as well go down the well:

“Are you and Harry still friends?” It appeared as though Ron was ready to talk about it as well.

“It would be easy to say yes, since we don’t see each other at all and don’t have to put it to the test.”

“But the answer is no?”

“He didn’t tell me he was leaving Hermione, seven months later and I still can’t get past that.” He sounded a little sad when he said it, but his face was pretty blank. Plus, Hermione noticed that he didn’t answer the question.

“Ron, it was me he didn’t trust, not you. He thought I would tell Professor Dumbledore about it and have him stopped. Besides, we didn’t help things when we didn’t tell him about us being a couple.” Harry had never flat out told her that he felt that way, but had dropped enough hints to give Hermione that impression.

“I was his best mate Hermione, now I’m not even his best mate in my own family.”

“Fred and George don’t spend ten months a year in a castle with Professor Dumbledore, and you know that.” Surprisingly, they had not talked about this very much over the months, Hermione sensing that only danger awaited her there, and Ron not wanting to push her over to the Harry camp.....Ron wasn’t a total moron.

“Maybe we should have accepted that offer, then things could be like they were.”

“I don’t know how well we would integrate with his new group Ron. He really seem to assimilate quickly with them. They’re not involved here, it’s probably a load off his mind.”

“They seemed nice enough at The Burrow, Mum and Dad took to them right away.” Even Ginny had goggled at that fact a little, though her parents had accepted Dean right away too.

“I don’t know, I think we should see how the twins fare over there.” Ron scoffed.

“Oh c’mon Hermione, if anybody can adapt over there its Fred and George. Besides, they helped save the school didn’t they?”

“I know, I just.....”

“Write to him Hermione, you know you want to. Or at least get Ginny to.”

“I will, but only if you do too.”

“I will, but only because you want me to. I just don’t know what to say to him, I’m sure Neville keeps him updated on the group’s activities.”

“Do you mind that?”

“Not as much as I should, and the stuff he’s sending over is pretty good. I’m fine with how things are. I’m not going to hassle Neville

about it, he and I have reached an accord about that and everything else.” Hermione didn’t totally trust that either, but took his word at face value.

“All right, I’ll get with Ginny and write Harry tonight. We’ll send it off to the twins so that Dobby can pick it up.”

“Dobby might be coming here, check with Dean to see if he has to make a delivery.” Dean was currently using a classroom to make some Nosebleed Nougat and Spell Grenades, the two WWW products that he seemed best at manufacturing. Ginny loved the arrangement, as Dean spent most of his salary on her, and she liked the fact that her family was so accepting of her boyfriend. The twins more than once had written him that his work passed muster with flying colors, and he had gotten a slight raise last week.

Hermione and Ginny wrote a long letter to Harry that night, talking a lot about Ron, and hoping to clear the air with him. They admitted, begrudgingly or not, that they had erred in not writing him after the school attack, assuming he would write them first to let them know that was okay. They tore up their initial draft after it seemed a bit too groveling, they did have their pride, and pronounced the second attempt as golden. Dean did have a delivery to make as it happened, and they sent the letter off with his stuff. Dobby came to the castle personally to get it, but was beyond wary of Dumbledore, and usually only stayed for about a minute.

Harry’s quick reply was as warm as it was brief. He readily acknowledged the divided loyalties that they had, and was even flattered that the loyalties were as divided as they were, given that Ron was their boyfriend and sister respectively. There was no mention of a summer visit, but he promised to keep in better touch than he had before. He explained that as busy as he would be with Quidditch starting up again soon, the Olympics to get ready for, not to mention the arrival of Fred and George, that he would make time to write at least one of the two every week. It was a nice letter on the surface, and both Hermione and Ginny felt guilty that they had been shunning him like they had.

It was only after they read his reply a couple of times that Hermione and Ginny realized that Harry had barely said anything of substance, and had just repeated a lot of their own ideas back to them, in different ways. Draco Malfoy and his situation weren't mentioned at all, nor was an answer to their one pointed question about whether he was supplying Neville and Luna with any Defense type tips. He spent two paragraphs talking about the Four Tooth Gimmerslammer article in The Journal For Obscure Creatures though, and the whole tone of the letter was quite genial. Not Luna, but Luna-lite. The two Hogwarts girls were a little miffed, but at least he had written back right away. And true to promise, another genial, saying not a whole lot but taking a long time to say it, letter arrived the following Saturday, and each Saturday thereafter for the rest of the term.

The next day, Sunday, went without incident in the rogue DA, which is actually what they called it, not thinking of anything catchier. They were now 15 people, and Draco was one of three who did, or planned on, double dipping. Dumbledore was aware of the rogue DA, but did nothing to stop its meeting, though he proscribed Remus from attending their meetings. The regular DA, still led by Cho and Jack Sloper, met on alternate Sundays, and Draco found that the rogue version was probably better in the long run. That was doubtless due to Harry's influence, as it certainly didn't appear that he was funneling Cho and company any spell and tactics. He was accepted by both groups, and pretty much kept his mouth shut most of the time, except when asked a direct question. He knew he had a lot of bridges to rebuild, and while he did not regret his former actions, too much, Draco understood fully that he was being judged on them. There was no word from Harry on this matter, as while Neville and Luna mentioned it in their letters, his replies ignored the situation entirely even to them.

The Slytherins, for reasons they kept to themselves, did not try anything on Draco during the next weeks. They confined themselves to dirty looks and the occasional muttered insult from Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode. He blithely ignored them though, as he wondered at how much his new Housemates would back him up if a full firefight developed. The month of March ended without a direct confrontation, but Quidditch was coming, and it was not out of

the question that Draco would be drafted for the starting lineup as a Chaser. Against Slytherin.

Tuesday, March 11, 1997

Defense Classroom A

2:00 pm

Defense Classroom A in the new building was the same as it was in the old one: An urban setting, the same one used on the very first day of classes, when they had their all for themselves mass duel. There was an air of excitement among the students as they eagerly put their books off to the side of the street, and got their wands out. Ripley came in a couple minutes later, accompanied by Professor Murray, and Kate Atkinson, an Auror Pod Leader from the Milwaukee office, who had been at the school during the battle.

“Hello class, today’s exercise is a little different, and to help me I’ve drafted a couple of volunteers. You all know and worship Professor Murray, and also assisting us is Kate Atkinson, a seven year veteran of our Auror Command in Milwaukee.” Ripley, now fully recovered from his injuries, enlarged a bag he had been carrying, and took out three large objects, keeping one for himself and giving the others to Atkinson and Murray. The class, most of them, gasped at first. They were guns. Sort of.

Paintball guns.

“Today’s lesson is going to be all about dodging fire from muggle weapons. Now we can’t use the real thing of course, trust Harry and I when we tell you: the real thing hurts like crazy.”

“Amen.” The first day back at Defense, both Harry and Ripley had shown off their scars.

“Thank you Harry. So we’re going to use these little babies. They shot paintballs, and while the impact does sting a little if they hit in the wrong place, it’s definitely not something that’s going to injure you.

Professor Murray and Miss Atkinson are going to help me fire away at you, you can respond only with Repulsar, Petrificus Totalus, or Stupefy. No less, and certainly no more, and that includes shields for the time being. No Summoning Spells, Harry, and nothing that would make me take yet another trip to see Dr. Carter. He's a lovely man, but I've gotten to know him about as well as I want to for the time being. It's going to be three groups of you going in turn. First up is Ray, Claudia, Reiko, and Amanda. Next will be Eric, Harold, and Liesel. Finally will be Harry, Sophie, and Drew."

"The object of the exercise is to not get hit. No kidding. The three of us will fire at you, just as you will fire back at us. A paintball hit on one of your arms or legs means that you cannot use that arm or leg for the rest of the 'battle'. A hit on the head or torso and you are out. There are bonus points awarded for surviving each time and for hitting one of us. First group, take your positions, you have two minutes to get ready." The four of them huddled for a minute, then split off into two pairs: Ray and Amanda, and Claudia and Reiko. The other two groups found some defilades and watched the two minute massacre of their classmates, as they barely got a shot off as the three adults pumped round after round at them. Ray did almost graze Murray one time, but he was then nailed in the ear by a well placed shot from Atkinson.

The second group lasted exactly three minutes longer, mostly due to tired trigger fingers from the shooters it seemed. Eric Liddell lasted the longest of the group, and did manage to hit Ripley with a pulse spell on the arm, which knocked him out of the fight for about 15 seconds until the feeling came back. Harry watched nothing but the shooters, looking for any weaknesses and habits that he could exploit. After a five minute break, during which Harry, Sophie, and Drew were not allowed to strategize, the exercise commenced again. The three kids took their positions, Harry being nearest, followed by Drew and then by Sophie. Harry was positioned 15 meters from the nearest shooter, which was Ripley.

As he got ready for the exercise, Harry had a brief flashback to the battle, his eyes glazed over a bit as he thought he could hear some of the bullets being fired at him, and smell some of the cordite. Ripley was about to start things again when he saw this. He held up his

hand for a moment to Murray and Atkinson, and waited for Harry to come back. After about 10 seconds, Harry snapped back into it, and Ripley counted down from three as he had before.

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One!”

“FIRE!”

All three shooters fired their initial salvos at Harry, trying to take him out of the game right away. This did not prove to be a wise strategy as it turned out, as Harry somehow herked and jerked enough to dodge the three streams of paintballs coming at him while he advanced five meters on Ripley, shooting. It also allowed Drew and Sophie to fire without distraction, and by sheer coincidence, they both aimed for Murray, and nailed her with Repulsar and Petrificus Totalus, in reverse order, which froze her and knocked her backwards. Harry saw Murray go down and immediately charged toward Ripley, firing Repulsar after Repulsar at his teacher, and the older man soon stopped firing as he was forced to start dodging.

Seeing that Harry had Ripley busy, Drew and Sophie advanced on Atkinson, who was both furthest away and the worst shot of the three. They used nothing but Stunners and had her bracketed in seconds as Drew aimed left and Sophie aimed right. They got her on Drew's sixth shot and Sophie's fifth, both of them arriving at the same time and knocking her back about 10 feet, and knocking her out of course. That just left Ripley, who fully healed in the legs by now, started ducking and weaving himself. He managed a hit on Harry's right arm and Drew's right leg before a hailstorm of Stunners brought him down, Harry now firing almost as well with his left hand as his natural right one. He and the other two were quickly awoken, and he addressed the class.

“Why am I not surprised that this particular squad wound up defeating us. Harry, what do you think the difference was?” Harry stated what he thought to be the most obvious.

“Well if all three of you are going to target the same person, you’d better get him or her really quickly, cause you’re just giving the others free shots at you.”

“Good point, your ability to dodge fire like that was beyond ridiculous. Drew?”

“He’s right, you three employed bad strategy from the get-go, and once you didn’t hit him, you guys didn’t really have a chance.” Sophie piled on as well.

“He’s right, though we would assume the Lycans to be better trained in the use of weapons like that, so on that score the exercise was not totally realistic.” Quite the bruising critique, but all of it was on point, so few arguments could be made.

“Good work you three, very impressive. Now we’re going to make things even harder for you. It’s going to be two of us shooting, and only one of you defending. Same fire back rules apply, you have five minutes to come up with some strategies, on your own still. Harry, if you’ll come here for a second please.” Murray and Atkinson recovered quickly from their collective thrashing, and reloaded their rifles and got their backup ammo at the ready. Harry walked up to his teacher.

“Are you all right Harry?” Harry looked uncomfortable, and tried to deny it.

“I’m fine sir, we did win after all.” True, but beside the point here.

“No Harry, you know what I mean, from right before the shooting. You went somewhere else for a few seconds.”

“I know, I was remembering that morning a little.”

“You were having a flashback Harry, it happens.”

“It never has before.”

“No, because when you’re fighting magic with magic you have a defense, the spells don’t move as quickly or as rapidly, it really is a duel. Bullets are indiscriminate, much less personal and far more random.”

“Is that why we’re so afraid of a war with the muggles? The randomness?” Ripley smiled a little.

“Oh we could handle the muggles easily if it came to it. A few Imperious curses on the major muggle leaders is all it would take. We can blend in, the Lycans and Kindred can’t as much, because of the full moon and need for blood. Yes, we’re better off if the muggles don’t know know if we’re around, but I couldn’t be less worried about waging war with them.” Harry believed that, and Greenleaf held much the same view, but he was still troubled.

“I don’t have nightmares, not since I mastered Occlumency, but when I saw you with that gun.....”

“I was the same way Harry, I needed some time to collect myself when I broke them out. Joanne was the same way too. Yes, we’re soldiers, but we’re human too, however tough and talented we may be.”

“So this is normal?”

“Yes it is, muggle soldiers feel the same way, most of them anyway. We’ll be doing this again in a month, let me know how you’re feeling then.”

“I will, thanks Professor Ripley.”

“Anytime Harry. Now get ready, but you’ll go last.”

“Gotcha.”

The two on one was a disaster for most of the students, as Murray and Ripley did the shooting, and quickly learned to shoot as a team. Only Drew managed to get a hit until Harry, who took both of them down, but not before getting nailed on both legs and his right arm again. The paint could be brushed off, no magic needed, and the students quickly looked at it as an advanced form of their monthly dodging drills. Harry was the quickest of the students by nature, being smaller than all the boys, as well as Claudia and Amanda Knight. Ray Elwood flat out asked if the students could do some of the firing, and was told ‘maybe next time, perhaps’, which they all took as a no.

Eventually Ripley allowed the worm to turn for the students, and they were allowed two of them to one paintball shooter. This did not go well for the shooter, and they wound up losing all five duels, if one wants to call them that. Harry, for a change of pace, teamed with Claudia, and they took out Ripley in a matter of seconds, with Harry rapidly firing Pulse spells at him while Claudia took her time and lined up a sure shot.

This whole thing was notable in that it was the first time that Ripley had physically involved himself in their lessons, at least since their Apprentice/Fourth years, when these kids had him last. He had resisted entreaties to have one on one duels in class, feeling that Harry and Drew would wipe the floor with the rest of them, and they wouldn’t learn much then. And a Harry/Drew match would be very interesting, but Ripley felt that Harry was just too quick for the other boy to handle. He still assumed that Drew’s spell knowledge outstripped Harry’s though, not knowing about the trunk library, not that any other faculty member save Lyman did, though the sardonic History teacher had not yet seen it. And part of him, perhaps just a small part, was worried about what would happen if he took Harry on. He knew that he was still more experienced than the lad, and had more theoretical knowledge as well, but it would be close enough that the older man just didn’t dare chance it.

The lesson ended that day with the teacher giving all 10 of the students a chance to fire the paintball guns into the wall a few times.

Eric Liddell was muggleborn, and it turned out that he had played paintball before, so he was the best shot of the bunch. They all had fun though, and Ripley was quietly congratulated by his boss for thinking of it. The lesson was repeated with the seventh year Basic Combat class as well the next day, and none of them survived the entire lesson without getting killed, as Harry had. Ripley was considering combining the two classes for a special Sunday duel, but ultimately decided to do it after the Olympics. He figured that the Seniors should have some indication, beyond rumors, about what Harry could do.

Saturday, March 22, 1997

7:50 am ET

Marquette High School Cafeteria

Marquette, Michigan

The gang, and a lot of other Junior year students walked through the doors and made for the registration tables. The SAT registration tables. Over 80 percent of the Junior Class of Great Lakes was in attendance, all in coats and ties in what was now an annual tradition for the locals: the prep school invasion. Great Lakes, the muggle version, had an eccentric reputation among the locals, since this was practically the only time of the year they were ever seen. An abandoned farm eight miles from the new Great Lakes site had been altered magically to look like a school, for those who liked to drive by. No visitors allowed of course, and the school put all unsolicited applications in the circular file without opening them.

The kids lined up at the tables, and Harry, for what seemed like the 30th time, looked at Sophie and whispered to her:

“Can I please get another explanation of just what the heck I’m doing here?”

“You’re making your girlfriend happy by donating your Saturday morning to be my good luck charm.” That was a new line, and Harry didn’t have the heart to argue with her any longer after hearing it.

“Okay fine, I’m here with bells on. Just as long as you don’t expect me to do well on this stuff. You know the last time I was in a science or a math class? 1991 Sophie, that’s a long, long time ago.”

“It’s the same for all of us Harry, you just haven’t done the prep work that we have. The average Great Lakes score on the SAT for the last 10 years is 1210. That’s pretty good for an average. Kristy Penman got a 1600 last year you know, that’s how she got into Harvard.” Kristy was Drew’s ‘friend with benefits’. Harry knew not so deep down that the others would have do quite well for that average to stay like that, if his score was counting. His premonitions about Sophie signing him up had been correct, it was a total gang conspiracy as they had split the signup fee six ways. Harry had publicly vowed revenge, and was privately contemplating a prank war against each of the six.

They inched along in the line and got their materials. The gang sat at three tables somewhat near each other: Sophie, Harry, and Drew at one, Jonas and Warrick at another, and Claudia and Reiko being in the corner. At precisely 8:00 am the testing started. It lasted four hours, and Harry hated every bloody second of it, it was worse than his OWL’s the year before, though without any histrionics.....well not counting the nerdy looking muggle who wiggled out at the $\frac{3}{4}$ pole, but the monitors calmed him down and got him back in his chair after only a few minutes. Harry was one of the few who even paid attention, this was his entertainment for the morning. The thing was though:

Harry left the cafeteria not feeling so bad about how he did. There were parts of it that were a little confusing, but on the whole, he was a lot more optimistic than before. As the Great Lakes students got on the bus to go back to school:

“So Harry? How do you think you did?”

“Competently, or that’s what I’m now hoping for. It’s not like I’m going to need it or anything, I’m still sticking to my guns on that, no muggle university.” Ray Elwood heard that and had an opinion.

“Like Quidditch will keep you occupied enough.” Harry grinned at him.

“No it probably won’t thank you very much, and that’s why I’m going get more involved in WWW. Sales and invention need more hands on deck, and I’m going to do my part. At this rate, we’ll be taking over Zonkos by the end of the century, and that would suit me just fine.” WWW’s growth rate was talked about in exponential terms, and the twins had finally put some of the manufacturing work on to Lee. Lee, Winky, and Dean were now putting a combined 35 hours a week into manufacturing of the products, with Fred and George putting at least 50 hours each themselves, both for current orders and for stockpiling. The big move was less than a month away, and the twins had promised everyone involved that they would actually study this time.

“Then what are you doing on this bus Harry?” Everyone laughed.

“What did you call me Sophie? Your good luck charm?” She had her arm around him, and gave him a loud kiss on the cheek.

“That’s right folks, my whipped boyfriend.” Harry shrugged theatrically and rejoined casually

“It beats getting her tampons at the grocer.” There was a slight pause, and then the bus exploded with laughter.

Sophie’s face had never been more red in Harry’s experience, and in the seat on the opposite aisle to Harry, Warrick’s three day old head of hair practically turned white as he doubled over in laughter. Harry knew he would suffer for it later, but it was so worth it. Even Riley Poole, the bus driver for the day, could be seen snickering as he started the bus up and pulled away. The mood on the bus was one of euphoric exhaustion, now that it was over, and their teachers had been compassionate about their lost weekend, and had not assigned

any short-term homework due the next week. All they had were long-term projects and papers.

Monday, March 31, 1997

Today was the big day, Sophie turned 17 and reached her majority. She had gotten a card and a large present on Saturday from her mother and father, it having gotten there early due to the vagaries of muggle mail delivery. Her father, after his Obliviation in January, had had planted in his mind that Sophie actually attended the ghost school that she was registered at for muggle purposes. Peter Weir had been sending letters twice a month since, and Sophie was finally getting to know her father as an adult. He didn't seem so bad now, his letters were long and read very much like something an attorney would write. There was talk of him being appointed to a Federal judgeship, and his last letter was full of excitement about it, that was a long-held goal of his.

It was a strange feeling for her though, and a sad one too. She had gotten her father back, more or less, but done as part of a lie, a denial of who she was. Sophie had gotten a letter from Mitchell Baylor after the Obliviation was done, detailing some of the do's and don'ts for dealing with her new and improved father, and she was slightly dreading going back there for a visit come summer. Spring Break was in the last half of this week, Monday and Tuesday being make-up time for the post battle chaos, but she had begged off going to Springfield for the time being. Her mother's latest letter had had an undertone of hurt in it, but Sophie found it hard to have much sympathy, the wall between them had not totally crumbled as of yet. In truth though, she was feeling some regret over the whole thing, wondering that if maybe she had pushed a little harder, things would have thawed years earlier. She and Reiko had talked about it one night before bed, with Kelly and Miranda being off at their respective booty calls.

"I wonder what would have happened if I'd gone there myself, no wand in hand or anything, just made my mother face things." Reiko had often thought of suggesting just that over the years, but there was something just delicate enough about Sophie that would

dissuade her every time. Plus, she didn't trust Mother or Father Weir not to try something, and a wandless Sophie would be defenseless, as would any of the then five person group who came with her. The January incident had proven her correct, though she was not proud of that.

"I don't know Sophie, I think it was a perfect storm kind of thing. Your brothers were both there to help grease the skids, it was the holidays, and the nobility of your boyfriend and his best friend sticking up for you. I don't know if one of those, or even two, would have done the trick."

"The way Harry just did that, he just walked into a hostile house and did what he wanted. And it worked too, that's what I can't believe, even months later."

"There is a lot to be said for the direct approach Sophie, we can all learn a lot from that boy in that area. The fact that he could use his wand that day surely helped a little." In fact Reiko felt that it had made most of the difference.

"He can be subtle too."

"I know he can, you don't have to sell Harry to me. If there was no Warrick and no you, I'd probably go after him myself." Harry and Warrick both would start howling if they heard that, and Harry's occasional daydream of slapping a Listening Charm in the room would have facilitated that, but even he wasn't so bold. Yet.

"Maybe I should start learning some of his Dark Defense things, you know, just in case."

"I don't think you should Sophie, not without him suggesting it at any rate. You would only need it if you go over there to Britain, and I know Harry's is doing everything he can to avoid that."

"What about the summer? I know he wants to go for a visit then."

“A visit is one thing Sophie, I mean we all survived Christmas breakfast at The Burrow, Ron notwithstanding.....but Harry is going to have to deal with his demons there if you have any emigration plans.”

“I am not going over there to live Reiko.” She had not told that to Harry in no uncertain terms mind you, but the hints had gotten across just fine.

“And Harry? Will he stay? I know we’ve all just been assuming that, but still.”

“We don’t have to decide about that for almost a year.”

“You think you can get him to stay?” That was the million dollar question.

“I don’t know Reiko, but I know I want him to.”

“What does he say?”

“He says that nothing can be decided until Voldemort is dealt with.”

“There you go, and we always knew that. Sophie, he needs to get that war out of his mind before he can move on with his life, and the only way to do that is to win it.”

“Is it winnable?”

“Harry thinks so. We were walking back from our Quidditch workout a couple of weeks ago, and he was telling me about this curse he read about that turned water into wine, literally. He then casually mentioned that the human body is 90 percent water. Let me tell you Sophie, I wanted to run and hide under my bed, and he was so blasé about it. He’s reading this stuff to get ready. He knows that guy over there won’t let him sojourn here forever.” Harry and Reiko talked a lot while working out for Quidditch, and had become close friends

besides their both being in the gang, there was no best friend/boyfriend tension here.

“What if he dies?” Reiko was ready for that one.

“We could have all died in that werewolf attack Sophie, we live in a dangerous time. For muggle kids too. Remember that story on Dunblane, Scotland we read about? Where that nut shot and killed 16 kids before turning the gun on himself? Harry told me that they never even heard about it at Hogwarts, but he was horrified last summer when he read about it in an old magazine in his hotel lobby. Life is cheap in the industrial age.”

“You sound like Professor Ziegler.” She had heard the man talk enough to know.

“Thanks, some best friend you are.” She threw her pillow at Sophie, and a fight commenced, ending the deep thinking and talking. This was three nights earlier, and Sophie was thinking about it as she came back from class.

Sophie snapped back into it, as she entered the Lounge. She looked for Harry and found him, he was playing some kind of game on one of the rigged computers, this was his one class in the morning day. She walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Having fun while the rest of us were slaving away in class?”

“There is always fun to be had when I’m not in class and the rest of you are.”

“Ha ha, I’ll remember that next year if I get the lucky schedule.”

“Our schedules won’t be the same next year? We’ll have the same classes after all.”

“Nah, they tweak them from what I hear. Besides, you might be with us in Advanced Transfiguration.” Harry shook his head, simultaneous with his game finishing.

“Warrick’s the favorite for that right now, and if need be, I’ll tank a little to keep him there. He should be in at least one Advanced class after all, and I like having one easy class, with Wash teaching us.” Wash taught just enough interesting stuff to keep Harry interested, but only just. Harry closed the files he was working on, he had been puttering around on a Charms paper as well, and got up.

“Why Harry, that’s so.....what’s the phrase the twins use? So Slytherin of you.”

“Please don’t start that. Besides, it’s more Hufflepuff than Slytherin. Slytherins only think of what’s best for them, while Hufflepuffs are all about loyalty to their friends.”

“Just don’t tell Warrick about your little plan.”

“It’s not a plan, just a contingency. I haven’t done any tanking yet, he’s leading right now on his own merits.”

“All the better. So what are we doing tonight?” He looked at her strangely, they had talked about this with the others.

“You’re having a party in the trunk, not that it’s much of a surprise, being your birthday and all. You are 17 years old, I’m so jealous.” The gang had led a raucous chorus of Happy Birthday for her at breakfast, with Dobby waving a baton and inviting others to join in. He didn’t like the first ‘take’ and had insisted on a second one, to Sophie’s total and complete mortification. The second time was a lot fuller, as most of the room joined in at Dobby’s urging. Sophie loved Dobby, but badly wanted to strangle him. Upon hearing her express that wish, Harry and Jonas immediately, and loudly, started taking odds on who would win a wrestling match between Sophie and Dobby. Only the presence of witnesses prevented a homicide.

“No kidding, I mean what are WE doing tonight. Am I staying over?” Ahhhhh, thought Harry. They had vaguely discussed this topic before Valentine’s Day, but he had been hesitant to bring it up again. He felt that he needed to be decisive right now.

“Yes, in the trunk. That’s what I’d like, yes. Right.” No such luck on the decisiveness apparently. She giggled a little at the look on his face.

“But you’re not nervous, no.”

“Of course I’m nervous, that’s beside the point. Why, aren’t you?” She was now red in the face.

“Yes I am, and how is it beside the point?”

“I think we’re supposed to be nervous, that’s what makes it special. If we didn’t care one way or the other, it wouldn’t mean as much.” Sophie smiled at that.

“Wow, I am always being reminded that you’re not like most guys.”

“It’s the Welsh in me, they’re supposed to be more romantic.” They both laughed.

“We are staying the trunk right? I know we can use Silencing Charms in your room, but.....”

“No, no, and no yet again, it’s the trunk or nothing. I’m not giving them any wink and nod opportunities. I’m going to make sure that our first time is at least somewhat covert.”

“How’s your disinformation project going?” That would be Harry’s scheme to throw off the gossip hounds, and have some laughs at the same time.

“Very, very well. Did you hear the rumor about me financing your run for President next year?” The American Wizard Presidential Election was due in November of 1998.

“That you was you who started that!?” Harry started cackling as they moved over to one of the couches.

“I can’t believe they bought it, oh man. I was playing chess with Nan last week and started talking about it with her, she promised to spread it around in her House. I didn’t think anything good would come of it, it’s nice to be wrong every once in awhile.”

“She’s in on the joke though?”

“Oh sure, that’s what makes her so convincing. That girl is going to be some actress when she gets older.” Nan Mahon, quite the beauty, had Hollywood aspirations. Harry thought of her as a little sister, and had taken to giving threatening looks to a few of the bolder louts trying to get her attention. Nan loved that idea, she and Sophie had talked a couple of times and now got along very well.

“I liked the one about how you and I, and Reiko and Warrick, were going to have a double wedding ceremony at graduation this year.”

“That wasn’t me who started that one.”

“You didn’t? Warrick?”

“Yeah, he saw how much fun I was having and figured that he needed to get in on it too. He was going to include Jonas and Claudia in it, but Jonas threatened to defenestrate him.....whatever that means.” Sophie knew.

“It means death by throwing someone out a window, or something like that. Like in Braveheart, when the King threw his kid’s boyfriend out the window.”

“Do I want to know how you came about this knowledge?”

“I read it somewhere, I can’t remember. Anyway, after the party?”

“After the party.”

“Did you guys decide on whether to invite Kelly and Miranda or not?”

“Are you still maintaining that it doesn’t matter to you either way on them?”

“Yes.”

“Then no, they’re not coming. I don’t want any outsiders in my trunk if I can help it. Rick and Terry are one thing, in no small part because they know how badly I’ll nail them if something goes missing.....but Kelly and Miranda, not as much.”

“Because you couldn’t terrorize a girl?” If only you knew about my Umbridge offer, Harry thought. He had not shared the information with anyone at Great Lakes, only with Fred and George. The two had agreed with him both on the fact that he would have been justified in doing it, and that he would have felt irrevocably dirty about it afterward. The two of them were vaguely disappointed that Rufus had not made them the same offer, as he had paid them the courtesy of a call to get their Oaths in the Draco Malfoy matter.

“Something like that. So what’s for dinner? What did you wind up telling Dobby and Winky that you wanted?”

“I told them to make whatever they wanted, I don’t really have a favorite food or anything like that.” She had told him this before, but he always thought she was just being agreeable.

“And the cake?”

“Oh German Chocolate definitely, but you guys are going to have to eat most of it, just one piece for me.”

“You can have more than one you know, they’ll make one every day if you want. You’re slim enough for two slices of cake you know.”

“I know that thank you, but I just don’t have a big appetite, unlike some people.”

“I love food, what do you want from me.” Reiko and Warrick came in now, and talk turned to the rest of the week, which they would have off from classes, starting at 4:00 pm the next day. Visits home could be arranged on a case by case basis, but the semi-tradition was that students would stick around and get caught up on their homework, and get ready for the Olympics. Olympic Trials for each House would take place during the latter half of April, with the competition being in the last week of May. When Drew, Jonas, and Claudia got there, the gang repaired to the trunk.

Dobby and Winky had decided on a seafood buffet, with varying kinds of snapper, cod, and prawns. Salad and cheese breadsticks were also available as the gang dug in. Sophie, upon learning of the party, requested that no presents be bought, but she was duly ignored. CD’s were again the order of the day, being a very safe present to get someone, while Harry had gotten her a complete set of Foxtrot comic strip books. He had seen the strip, drawn by the incredibly talented Bill Amend, in a muggle newspaper, and decided that it might be something she would go for. Bill Amend was not a relation to the youngster who played Chaser on the Cortez Quidditch team, Billy Amend, who got a kick out of finding out that his namesake was a nationally known cartoonist. The others had been expecting something more.....well, gaudy, from Harry as his present, and he was delighted to screw up their assumptions. The books still cost almost \$100, so he wasn’t being cheap. He was going to save more jewelry for their anniversary in August.

The new music played all evening, and they had a fun time playing board games and UNO. Dobby still was king at poker and UNO, and they reluctantly taught him how to play Monopoly. He wasn’t as skilled at that game though, since so much of it depended on the luck of the dice. He won most of the games of course, but he wasn’t dominant. Yet.

The others left around 10:00 pm, assuming that Sophie and Harry wanted some private time. This was a correct assumption, as Harry

had started fidgeting a little toward the end. Only Reiko knew what was going to be going on though, as Sophie knew Claudia would try to talk her out of it, she was the same way with Reiko when Warrick rounded third for home. Harry had no interest in giving any previews to Warrick, Drew, or Jonas.....all of whom had more experience at this than he did, Jonas much more so. He wasn't interested in pointers or tips, or the pressure of having to answer the question afterward: So how was it?

“So, we're alone now.” They were now on the couch, which Harry had long planned on Transfiguring into a bed this purpose, and this purpose alone. He got up for a few seconds and put a Sealing Charm on the door, just in case.

“Yes we are, and you seem more than a little nervous.”

“You keep reminding me of that.”

“I do, it's very interesting.”

“Because I charge headlong into life threatening situations but I'm nervous about having sex with my girlfriend?” She was just teasing him of course, but Harry was currently having visions of this conversation with Cho or Ginny before his first time, and under any other circumstance, it might have had an effect on certain things.

Not now though.

“Something like that, it's a fascinating dichotomy.”

“Heaven forbid I act like a normal teenager every once in awhile.”

“We can't be having that now can we?”

“No we can't, and I'm raring to go thank you very much.”

“Ah the romance.”

“I am romantic all the time thank you. Didn’t I get you a comic strip book series for your birthday? Which is more than you got for me for my birthday I’ll have you know.”

“I didn’t know you on your birthday!”

“You met me two days later, some flowers would have killed you?”

“Oh my God!” They were both giggling like crazy now, and Harry reluctantly got off the couch and extended his hand to help her up. He then grabbed his wand off the desk and pointed it at the couch:

“Commutatus!”

It transformed into a twin-sized bed, though without any blankets. Harry pulled one of out the closet and put it at the end of the bed. The bed was a little small, but they didn’t exactly need a lot of room.

Harry was about to kiss her when he thought about something very important:

“Um, do I need something here?” She looked at him, puzzled.

“Like what?” Oh God, Harry thought, I have to say it.

“Protection.” Like in the muggle world, there was no birth control pill for men, so a condom would be the order of the day, unless.....

“I took some Kiplinger’s this morning, we’re fine. Don’t get that look on your face, it works just fine. Ask Reiko.” Kiplinger’s was a liquid pill that tasted like a chocolate shake.....rather a chocolate shake tasted like Kiplinger’s, since the wizard variety came first. It came in small bottles that were precisely what needed to be taken on a given day, and would last 24 hours.

“Oh yeah, I really want to ask Reiko about her sex life.”

“I refuse to believe that you and Warrick don’t talk about that.”

“Yet I keep telling you that we don’t. A gentleman never tells, or at least never asks. And I do not ask.”

“I thought you were just being diplomatic and protecting him.”

“Look, I know that they have sex, but that’s it.” All this dry sounding talk wasn’t totally pointless, as they were undressing each other all the while, and talking some of their nerves out.

“And Jonas really doesn’t brag to you guys?”

“He doesn’t brag, but he tells us when he has a new woman of the week, so we make sure not to be overly nice to the woman of last week, though I still have trouble keeping them straight.” Which was way more diplomatic than it sounded, and Sophie more or less understood and appreciated that. Clothes were now off, and Harry took a second to enjoy the sight. It was a sight seen many times over the last three months, when they had reached that step, but he never failed to appreciate it.

“You ready?”

“You bet Mister. Are you?” Harry couldn’t think of a 16 year old boy who wouldn’t be ready under these circumstances, and he was no exception.

“Yes ma’am I am.” He moved toward her, and they fell on to the bed.

Sounds of crickets chirping, teenagers moaning, and a transfigured bed creaking could be heard for the next hour, not that anyone was around to hear it. Dobby and Winky had been advised to spend the night at WWW.

They lay next to each other afterward, under the blanket.

“That was lovely Harry.” Harry just held her in his arms and drank in the moment. After a slight poke in the ribs from Sophie:

“Oh yes, definitely. Well, amazing is the word I would prefer to use actually.” She smiled into his chest.

“Oh yeah, that too. It was a lot different than what we’ve been doing.”

“Very much so. Did it hurt too much?”

“It hurt, but not too much. I’m glad we waited though.”

“Me too. That really was amazing.” Sophie giggled.

“Am I sensing that you’re ready for more?” It certainly felt that way.

“I don’t want you to be too sore tomorrow, we don’t have to.” Just the answer she wanted to hear, quite the gentleman, and talking ceased.

More crickets chirping and such, this time for only 30 minutes though.

“I can’t wait to do some bragging to all the girls tomorrow about this, it’ll be great.”

“Yuck, yuck. Aren’t you hilarious.”

“Yes I am, and Warrick and Reiko will suspect something when neither of us come to our beds tonight.”

“Let them suspect all they want, only you and I will know the truth. Always keep them guessing darling.”

“I love it when you bring your political scheming into bed with us.” She was laughing when she said it, so any instinct to take offense died very quickly.

“I’m always trying to keep you entertained.”

“Only Claudia left in the gang that hasn’t done it.” Harry now felt free to ask something he had wondered.

“Do you think that maybe Claudia.....”

“Hits for the other team?”

“Well it wouldn’t be that surprising.”

“No, she likes guys Harry, trust me. We talked all about that, more than once. She’s waiting for the right guy to sweep her off her feet, like you did for me.”

“Are you sure she doesn’t like girls? Maybe I should be checking the Map more often.”

“Go ahead, but for the love of God don’t ask her about it. I think she gets some cracks from some of her Housemates.” Well Harry didn’t like the sound of that, and his tune changed with lightning speed.

“Who are they and how badly should I punish them?”

“You were asking the same things you know.”

“Yeah, to you, and I wasn’t going to crack on her about it. Nobody messes with my Marauders like that.”

“She can handle them Harry, and would probably be offended at your assumption that she couldn’t.” As tired as he was, having exerted himself quite a bit over the last 90 minutes, Harry still managed to sound indignant.

“Of course she can handle them Sophie, but she shouldn’t have to. That’s where I come in. Mess with my friend will they, not anymore.” Sophie then distracted him for the time being, though no more crickets chirped that night. The following morning was a different story though.

The next morning there was no walk of shame, if for no other reason than that Harry sent Dobby up to the room to make sure the coast was clear. They got knowing looks from everyone at the table, but everyone had enough compassion for Sophie at least to not say anything overt, or even covert. Harry, at Sophie's velvet coercion, did not ask Claudia about who was making comments towards her, but vowed that if he ever heard one, he would very happily introduce the culprit to Dr. Carter, the hard way.

During their abbreviated Spring Break, Harry and Sophie spent more and more time alone together in the trunk, and not just for cricket chirping. Sophie had asked him for some dueling practice, just the two of them, and he had readily agreed. He seemed pleased that she was taking an interest in it, and Sophie raged at Reiko for advising her against asking.....to which Reiko wondered at why Sophie took so long to reject her advice, if she was going to reject it.

They worked on some advanced spells and movement exercises over the five days off that they had, no short-term homework assigned. They worked pretty hard at it, enough so that Sophie felt that she could take down Drew if she really had to, she was at that level. The rest of the gang just thought that they were having sex the whole time of course. They were wrong only about the 'whole time' part of it.

Saturday April 5, 1997

Diagon Alley, London

WWW

4:00 pm GMT

Fred and George took one last look around the front of the shop, where they would not be allowed to appear during daylight hours. Lee was due back in a minute, and then they would start their portkey journey to Boston, where they would then floo to Great Lakes.

"Well, here we are Fred."

“Right, our last look at Diagon Alley in daylight for almost three months.”

“I’m getting a little weepy.”

“Very teary eyed I am.”

“I hope this trouble is worth the trouble, 10 weeks of doing homework, and NEWTs too.”

“I’m sure that next week will be hell on earth, but we’ll survive. And we’ll have Quidditch remember, Harry said that Geyser didn’t need to be convinced to let us play Chaser.” Harry hadn’t even finished his spiel before Geyser made the suggestion himself.

“At least we have the trunks,, and Angelina and Alicia can come see us on the sly.”

“Oh yeah, I would have vetoed this without the trunks.”

“Me too, that was a brilliant idea to get those. Peter Tyson earned his fee with that decision.” Lee interrupted them by coming back in, he had been at the apothecary getting some supplies for them. He would be getting a few hours off each day from now on, with Molly coming in and dealing with the customers. She had promised up and down that she would not try to dissuade anyone from buying something, no matter how heinous their intention might seem to be on the surface.

“You guys ready to go?”

“We are. You remember the passwords for the trunks? If not, Dobby can always get them to you.”

“I remember them, it’s cool. Have fun over there.”

“I’m sure we’ll have a little bit. We’ll let you know about Quidditch, you can close the shop and come with Mum and Dad.”

“I can’t wait for that, you three back in the saddle again.” Fred took out a dog-eared paperback book, their portkey to Reykjavik, their stop between London and Boston. The three walked out back, out of sight of any pedestrians.

“Take care Lee, see you soon.”

“Don’t burn our shop down mate, be good.”

“Good luck guys.” George took a hold of the book in Fred’s hand, and with a long look of affection for their home base:

“Activate!”

They arrived at the portkey station in Iceland and relaxed for an hour before making the last leg to Boston. They spent a few minutes with the Auror on duty at Auror Command, talking swamps. The government had been very pleased with the initial order, and had put them on retainer to send 20 swamps per month, for replacements for the ones used in training. The swamps were not cheap, and fortunately Winky had a handle on how to do them. After some more rest time, they got into the floo and tumbled into Murray’s office, where she was expecting them. They said their prepared greeting simultaneously.

“Hello ma’am, top o’ the afternoon to you.” Murray smiled and shook her head.

“It’s still morning, but welcome to both you of you.”

“It’s afternoon for us, portkey lag and all that, good thing we slept in this morning.” She looked at them, no luggage being carried.

“Dobby taking care of your things?”

“Yes ma’am, he’s kind of bringing it piecemeal to Harry’s room until we get assigned one of our own. Or is it one of our own?”

“There is an extra room that we’re going to put you in, with no other roommates. I would prefer that Harry and Warrick stay in their current room though.” Dang it, they both thought, then Fred reached for a compromise they had prepared, just in case.

“If that’s what you want ma’am, but if you could, would you key the two of them to be able to enter our room? Harry explained all that to us, and it would be more convenient if he were allowed to go in and out like that.” She thought about that for a second, and didn’t see the harm.

“That’s acceptable, as long as he doesn’t sleep there most of the time. Oh, please don’t destroy the room while doing your prank work.”

“Oh we have that covered Professor, Harry’s going to move his trunk to our room. That’s why we asked to have him keyed in, the trunk is big enough to do our work in, and we don’t need to worry about wrecking anything.” There was a knock on the slightly open door, and Heyman walked in.

“I see our new arrivals got here. How was your trip?”

“Iceland is lovely this time of year.”

“We never went outside George.”

“I looked out a window while I was using the loo.”

“Ah, that explains it.” Heyman just chuckled.

“Are we ready for lunch? Or would that be dinner for you two?”

“We’re always ready for a meal, and Harry’s been bragging on the cooking here.”

“We don’t want hamburgers 10 meals in a row though, Jonas told us that story at Christmas. No thanks.” Murray just gave Heyman a look that said:

“What the hell have I done?!” Heyman just turned back to the door and started snickering.

The four of them went downstairs, where everyone was just digging in. The gang had taken a larger table than usual, with two extra places. Murray cleared her throat as she walked to her own table.

“As you all know, we have two new students starting today. You all met Fred and George Weasley back in February, when they helped save the school from being blown up.” Fred and George each gave a wave and a grin.

“Many of you have heard the story by now, Harry, of how Fred and George came to leave Hogwarts last year, 10 weeks from graduation. Though they are rapidly on their way to becoming business tycoons, they chose to finish their schooling, and asked me if they could do it here. Boys, will this get your mother off your backs?” Much laughter in the crowd.

“We can only hope Professor Murray.”

“Not much hope, but it should help.”

“We can’t have everything. Now originally I was going to use the chairs and have a Sorting, since Fred and George expressed interest in playing Quidditch and competing in the Olympics.” Harry had not made the deal public, and students from Shawnee, Jefferson, and Proctor all looked hopeful.....but.....

“However, due to their service in our Lycan battle, I told them that they could be put in Cortez, with their partner Harry Potter, if they so chose. They so chose. Cortez, welcome your newest Housemates.” No Sorting, no ban on applause, as the House went nuts, along with Drew, Claudia, and Jonas. The twins made their way to the gang’s

table, stopping to shake a few hands along the way. They plopped down to Harry's left.

“So who are we going to prank first?”

End Chapter

Saturday, April 5, 1997

Lunchtime

Continued

“So who are we going to prank first?” Harry rolled his eyes at them, as the other six started laughing.

“You’ve been here five minutes!” Fred looked at his watch.

“Seven minutes Harry, don’t exaggerate.”

“Which is precisely why we can’t do anything today, at least today. You think it wouldn’t look a little suspicious?”

“I thought you had all that wired with Murray?” Harry looked around, and saw that pretty much everyone had an eye on them, faculty especially. He dialed his voice down several notches.

“Could you try not to say that quite so loudly? And the key to that relationship is that I don’t go too far, and at least pretend to be subtle about it.”

“You spent all that time messing with the new Map, not to mention having to put the bottom half of Humpty Dumpty back together after the move.....we need to use it.” The Marauder’s Map II had indeed needed to be reconstructed for the teacher, classroom, and basement floors. It only took three hours with all seven plus the elves doing it, but the stress of it made Harry angrier and angrier as the night went on. It was a good thing that there were no Lycans wandering around, let’s put it that way. The anger abated only after Harry played a game of skeet shooting with his wand, with Dobby magically able to ‘pull two’ to send the rocks into the air. He found it to be very therapeutic, and he and Dobby and Winky had gone outside twice more since, it was their time alone to chat about things.

“Starting tomorrow guys, let’s get you situated here first.” The twins gave in for the time being and ordered their lunch, a couple of

Reuben sandwiches each, and soon everyone was chatting away. John Geyser and Ed Lattimore, roommates and best friends, came up and were introduced.

“Good to meet you guys, has Harry told you the situation for the team? The Chaser jobs are yours if you want them.” George answered him.

“Sounds like a plan to us, and we’ll make sure that we kick some tail against that Jenkins girl Harry told us about.”

“I’m glad he’s been filling you in.” Harry cleared his throat and looked at Reiko.

“Speaking of Sally Jenkins, I was wondering if you would be interested in a trade Reiko.”

“She can’t have Warrick, I’ve spent too long training him.” Harry took one look at Warrick and was quite tempted to launch a zinger, but business came first. He substituted a disgusted face for a verbal zinger.

“Okay, that was so not what I was getting at, but that’s my fault for being vague. I was wondering if you would be interested in playing Seeker for the next two games.” Silence at the table, as only the twins had been told of this little plan, and even then only in passing the week before. Reiko looked at Geyser, eyebrows raised in question. He pondered out loud:

“That would work, the Jefferson Seeker is not very good, you’d fly rings around him, Conner didn’t have much trouble with him last year, the Snitch was just stubborn. Interesting. Have you three ever flown together as Chasers before?”

“Yeah, once a year for four years, we would have a practice where we all changed positions, and we three always wound up as Chasers. Isn’t that where you got the idea Harry?”

“Right Fred, and I’ve played against two of the Jefferson Chasers this past summer, we can take them. Reiko, what do you think?”

“Sure, I’d love a chance to play Seeker, I had had half a mind to try for it last Fall until you came along.” Geyser took a few seconds to think about this, and while this particular idea had not occurred to him, he had been drawing up some new plays and gambits to exploit the superior fliers he would be getting. The Jefferson game was just four weeks away.

“Good, then it’s a done deal, and for the love of God Fred and George please outplay the incumbent Chasers in practice next week.” Lattimore had been watching all of this with great amusement, being the Captain of the cellar dwelling Quodpot team.

“I’m sure you guys have already had a look around on your last visit, so if you wind up having any questions about the classes, come see myself or John. What Advanced Classes are you taking?”

“Just Charms.” Ed seemed surprised, not knowing the indifferent students that the twins had been.....okay, that they still were.

“Really, not Defense?” Fred and George looked at each ironically.

“Well not that you would know it to look at us fight right now, but we weren’t the best students in Defense before Junior here took us under his wing. We each got P’s on our OWL’s, and even then I couldn’t believe it.”

“Me neither, I thought we were on the night train headed straight for Troll. We would probably do pretty well in that Basic Combat thing, but rules are rules, and we don’t want to rock the boat.” Harry reached over and felt Fred’s forehead.

“Funny, you don’t have a fever. Rule are rules?”

“I think we’re already stretching Professor Murray’s boundaries just by being here Harry, no need to ask for favors that technically, and certainly academically, we haven’t earned.”

“Point taken.” Just then Murray came over, having finished her lunch, one had to wonder if her ears were burning.

“Fred, George, I have some things to do this afternoon, so perhaps we could get you installed in your new room right now.” She was wary of exposing poor Heyman to the now turbo-charged gang all by himself. She quickly decided to let the twins get settled, and then throw Heyman to the wolves, he needed some excitement in his life.

“Sure thing ma’am, you lead we’ll follow.” Everyone got up, and Geyser and Lattimore decided to tag along as well, and the large group made it’s way up to Cortez. The empty room, all the years had one for each gender, was at the end of the long hallway, on the left. Well the Junior and Senior boys didn’t have spares, thanks to the Brits. Murray did the deal with her wand, and had Fred, George, Harry, and Warrick all keyed into the room.

“Guys, your schedules will be given to you tomorrow afternoon sometime, but the class times are common knowledge of course, so you could probably cobble together your schedule within the next 10 minutes if you really want to. Any questions?” Neither twin could think of any, and they both shook their heads in the negative.

“Good, I’ll see you all at dinner.” She made to leave, and Fred had one parting shot.

“Professor Murray?” She turned back to them.

“Yes?” The twins, in unison again:

“Thank you.” Murray smiled, she realized that she had added a nice amount of spice to her student body, with her three British imports.

“You’re welcome guys.” She left, and soon thereafter Lattimore and Geyser did as well. The gang, which was now nine strong, all looked at each other as Jonas made sure the door was closed all the way. Harry figured on first things first.

“Dobby!”

“Yes Harry?”

“The trunk has a new home, if you would go get it for us please.” Dobby popped there and back, and returned with the trunk. Harry opened it:

“Accio Map!”

The Map flew up into his outstretched hand, to the mildly jealous stares of everyone in the room save Drew, as Reiko and Sophie had not mastered that part of Wandless Magic yet, and the others were a ways away from even starting.

“Here we are, now what names do you want on it?” He had prepared them for this, it was only natural that they should be on the Map.

“I suppose Jekyll and Hyde would be inappropriate?”

“Which of you would be which is the question there.”

“All right, we can detect your marked lack of enthusiasm for that choice. Fred?”

“Harry my boy, do these nicknames have to have serious portent or historical context?” Harry’s eyes were about to roll back into his head.

“Well they can’t be stupid, but otherwise it’s your choice.” Fred grinned at him.

“Well that leaves a lot of open territory now doesn’t it? Call me Dr. Pepper.” Harry loved Dr. Pepper, and just hearing the name made him thirsty. He looked at George, who had a similar theme.

“I’ll be Snapple, I tried some of that stuff at this juice bar in London, I’m now addicted to it.” The room was silent as the gang took in the off-the-wall potential of these names. Jonas struck first.

“Can you imagine highlighting Snapple and Dr. Pepper on the wall next to a prank?” They all pondered that for a moment, and Warrick mused out loud.

“He’s right you know, it’ll confuse the hell out of everyone, and what are you always saying Harry?” The girls all said in unison:

“Always mess with their minds!” Fred and George put their arms around Harry.

“Our boy has grown up hasn’t he George?”

“We taught him well Fred.” Harry just shook his head as the twins mussed up his already mussed up hair.

“You know, I’m not sure what’s more worrisome here: That I’m the only sane person in this room right now, or that I’m the only who realizes it.”

“It’s a hassle to be you isn’t it?”

“It most certainly is Drew, thanks for being so understanding about it. Thanks to me you know, Drew, you’re the cover boy on a major magazine in the British publishing industry.” Drew’s sarcastic side, dormant for years, had been given new life by hanging around Harry and friends.

“Have I not been grateful? My mother has a framed copy prominently displayed in her office. Everyone who has an

appointment with her winds up asking about it.” Harry had not heard this before, and that gave him a moment of respectful pause.

“Wow, the power of the press in action.”

“You did buy a subscription to the Journal, didn’t you Harry.” How did she know about that?

“Why I don’t know what you’re talking about Claudia. Fred, George, how bout a tour of the place?”

“Is there really nothing to see outside?”

“Well there’s more to it than outside Hogwarts, but that’s not saying much is it?” He was referring to the chicken processing plant he had seen from the air the other day.

“Not really, no.”

“Then there’s just the inside. You should at least pretend to know where the library is, for when your parents come.” Fred’s comeback came fast.

“Oh like you spend a lot of time there.”

“I’ll ignore that. Let’s go.”

So the gang could be seen walking around the building for the next couple of hours, popping into every Lounge in what became a kind of WWW advertisement tour. ‘Meet the Creators’ in a way. Part of the appeal of WWW is that the partners were so young, and most customers knew one of them. Only Salem and most of the Tecumseh students hadn’t met the partners, and Harry was trying to figure out a way to change that.

Fred and George, like everywhere else they went, had a way of making themselves liked, and Great Lakes was no different. They spent at least 30 minutes in each Lounge shooting the breeze with their customers and potential customers, talking about the various

products and how they came to be. One line though, was standard in all four Lounges:

“No new products until we finish our time here. We have enough to deal with as far as homework and NEWT’s and all that fine stuff, it will be more than enough for us just to keep up with the stuff we’ve already invented.” Speaking of which, Seamus had now been drafted into a few hours per week of work, on Dean’s recommendation, which took a little bit more off of the twins’ load. Ginny had been told that she could have as many hours in the shop as she wanted come summer, and even Ron had been informed that he could have four days a week instead of his previous three, if he wanted. And if he behaved, though that was left implied rather than said.

Toward the end of the afternoon, the twins prevailed upon Harry to let them do a light prank, just something to warm up with.....and they wanted to use their new nicknames. Ones that Harry refused to call them out loud, no matter how much they threatened him. He laid down some ground rules first.

“One: no Joe Clancy, no matter how much you’ve heard about him. Since we Pink’d him, he’s behaved, and is absolutely not a viable target. Two: no faculty members are targets either, that will bring Murray down so hard on us that we’ll be serving detentions the rest of our time here. Three: no one can get hurt. Four: it has to be a wide spread, no nailing just one person and humiliating him or her. All right?” Those were much lighter restrictions than they had thought they would get.

“Fine by me.”

“Quite reasonable, oh Head Marauder.”

“Easy there, my liquid friends. What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing major, we’re a little out of practice at this. What’s that time delay spell you’re so good with?” Harry told it to them, and they excused themselves for a few minutes. When they came back, everyone looked at them curiously.

“Well?”

“Nothing major, just getting our feet wet. More will come later.”

What they did was to load the front doorknobs with a spell that turned the user's hair purple, though they used a ten hour delay on the spell. So roughly three dozen boys and girls, who had gone outside, woke up the next morning with their hair quite different than how they had seen it before going to bed. The source of the prank, the idea of which was gotten from the feet smelling campaign, was so obscure that no one ever cottoned on to it. The purple disappeared after two days, and graffiti could be seen floating down the hallway:

“Doc and Snapple were here.”

This was the first of many pranks that would visit Great Lakes over the next three weeks.

Monday, April 7, 1997

Muggle Studies Classroom A

9:00 am

This was the first class for the twins, Regular Muggle Studies, Professor Toby Ziegler presiding. Harry had given them the lowdown on all their teachers that he knew about. They had Maloney and Ziegler in common, and Harry had gotten to know Greenleaf sufficiently during the Commission meetings that he could fill them in on him as well. They got the rest from Geyser and Lattimore, who were quite helpful, considering that the twins were not rooming with, or hanging around with, any Seniors. As they entered the classroom, Fred turned to George:

“Well here we go.”

“No turning back now.”

“Strangers in an unholy land.”

“Only 49 more class days after this one.”

“What the hell were we thinking?”

“This is all Harry’s fault.”

“We’ll make him suffer for this, for being a good example.”

The other students were filing in now, there were only nine of them, and the twins finally went in and took their places. Ziegler came in seconds later, and while he silently went up to each twin and shook his hand, he did not acknowledge them otherwise, as this was a lecture day. Both twins, remembering Harry telling them about the not taking notes policy, just sat there and listened to his lecture about the American muggle judicial system.

It was a revelation in a lot of ways. Ziegler was just interesting enough to keep them listening to the lecture, and they learned quite a bit.....well they learned more than that, since they hadn’t known about any of it beforehand. They hadn’t a clue how the muggle British judicial system worked either. Maybe Hill had explained it last year, who knew? More than a couple of the terms flew over their heads, but they picked up more than they had thought. Neither Fred nor George was a stupid man, just not scholastically inclined until now.

Well, not even now, but the three hour class period passed a lot more quickly than they had anticipated it would. As they left the room, Ziegler stopped them for a moment.

“Well guys, your first class in a year.”

“It was really interesting Professor, a good way to start the week.”
The teacher smiled.

“Well that was very sincerely said, no matter how much you mean it. The transcripts will be delivered to your room tomorrow during lunch.”

“Thank you sir, it really was a good lecture. I would be lying if I said it was better or worse than any of Professor Hill’s back at Hogwarts.”

“Since we never really listened to any of them while we were there.”

“We were there more in body than in spirit you know.”

“I can imagine. What’s the difference here?”

“We don’t want to make the youngster look bad.” Ziegler was waiting for more, but that appeared to be it.

“Interesting theory, a bit noble. Go eat, I’ll see you next week for the discussion, and be prepared to discuss.”

“Yes sir, see you next Monday.” The twins took off for the Dining Hall, more than a bit pleased that their week had started off so promisingly. Their next class was Advanced Charms, with Professor Maloney.

That class was more of a fog for them than they had hoped it would be, as they were not really up on the lessons being learned. Flitwick had been a much different teacher, and had covered different areas at this point in the year than Maloney was doing. None of the spells they were using in the shop were of any use here, nor were Harry’s Dark-ish Defense curses going to be put to use. They muddled through though, and Maloney spent some extra time with them, trying to catch them up. Again, they paid all due attention to what was going on, but this was going to be a little harder than they had thought.

After Charms, they spotted Claudia leaving her class, and hurried up to her.

“Oh hey guys, how was Advanced Charms?”

“Very interesting, quite the change from Flitwick I must say.”

“As in the change from a vertically challenged man to a good looking woman?” They would never admit that in front of someone with access to their girlfriends.

“We don’t know what you’re on about.. We’ve been talking, George and I have, and we were wondering about something.” Claudia looked at them like she was about to pop them, if they asked what she thought they might want to ask.

“I’m listening.”

“Well we know that you’re single and all, and we wondered if perhaps your taste in men was stretchable, non-American-wise, specifically to the Scottish/Jamaican/Nigerian persuasion?” Claudia stopped dead in her tracks.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?”

“Well our friend Lee Jordan is who we’re talking about, he just broke up with his girlfriend a couple of weeks ago, and Fred and I are of the opinion that you two might hit it off. He’s a bit taller than you, charming, with long dreadlocks that would look terrible with our red hair but work with his.”

“And he’s gainfully employed, with a nice wage.”

“Right Fred, that too, he has the three best bosses in Western Civilization. And he’s more into books and such than we are, he got an O on his History NEWT, and Harry says that you’re into that sort of thing.” This was so not the conversation Claudia had ever expected to have with these two.

“So you’re trying to set me up with him?” Claudia had heard quite a bit about Lee from Harry over the months, and thought he sounded interesting enough for her to go for this.

“Well yeah, he is thousands of kilometers away in theory, but with the trunk and all.....” She interrupted him:

“Sure, I’ll give it a go.” Fred continued on:

“And he’s far more normal than either of us, Harry too, but don’t tell him we said.....hang on.” Claudia loved the looks on their faces.

“You see, I say what you want to hear and you just roll right past.” They recovered quickly though.

“That’s great, we’ll get something going in the trunk, a group thing of course, so you two can get to know each other with no pressure.”

“What happened with his muggle girlfriend? Last I heard he hadn’t told her about our world.” The twins shivered.

“Oh he told her eventually, but she didn’t believe him.” Claudia sensed that there was more to the story, and was not disappointed.

“Then he took her to Diagon Alley, and she practically had a nervous breakdown. Screaming and the like. The Obliviators weren’t even sure if they could do anything with her, the mind needs to be.....well, balanced, for our kinds of tricks to work on it.” Claudia’s eyes got huge.

“What happened?”

“Fortunately she lived alone and could disappear for a couple of days, and St. Mungos got her fixed up and modified. I got to tell you Claudia, we now know a lot more about Obliviation than we ever thought we would. Lee got a stern talking to by a Ministry official who shall remain nameless.” It didn’t take a genius to figure out who that official was, though Claudia was pretty smart.

“Your dad.”

“Well you didn’t hear that part from us, but yeah, the man in charge of the Muggle office. He got a long lecture about letting just any muggle in on the secret, and making sure they were up to the job of

processing it and things. Needless to say the relationship ended, particularly when the lady in question, Laura was her name by the way if we never told you, couldn't remember who Lee was."

"Well at least he didn't have to give the 'friend speech'."

"That was a bonus to be sure."

"Does he know that we're having this little conversation?"

"He does, and he was all for it. I get the feeling that Harry's been talking you up to him, but that's just a theory." Claudia started laughing.

"I'm going to kill that boy."

"You wish Claudia, nothing can kill Harry Potter." While he was certainly still smiling, George's voice had turned serious all of the sudden, and she looked at him with new eyes.

"You guys really believe that, don't you?" Fred took over.

"Sure as the two of us were born the same day, my friend. You haven't seen what we've seen, for almost six years of non-stop life endangerment, both here and in Britain. If we didn't know better, we'd say he was dead already, and is just a really solid looking ghost."

"Is that why you follow him?" Both of them grinned and shook their heads.

"No Claudia, though it is true that the safest place in the world is behind Harry in a fight. No, we follow him because we love him like a brother.....no, we don't love him in any other way thank you. He's a rare bloke, and our lives would be far worse off in every way if that git Ron hadn't sat with him on the train that day, it's about the only thing Ron's ever been good for now that we think on it. We met Harry first though you know."

“I know, he told us all about that day, he remembers every detail of it. No need for a pensieve there.” Fred grew wistful for a second, as George started chuckling. Fred:

“It was the day that changed everything. Harry chose Ron’s friendship over Draco Malfoy’s. I’m sure it seems like an easy choice looking back on it, and maybe Harry even thinks so now, but it was harder than he’ll admit to. Draco offered a clear path to Slytherin, to power. I have no doubt, and neither does George here, that Harry would be running the Death Eaters right now if he had picked Draco. He would have put paid on Lucius and all his idiot minions and taken over. In a sense, he would be Voldemort, just not as crazy. He didn’t of course, though how he grew up with a moral compass in that muggle house we’ll never understand. As Dumbledore is so fond of saying: Harry chose what was right over what was easy.”

“I never thought I would hear any of you quoting that guy.” Fred and George had always had some affection for Dumbledore over the years, particularly the first three or so, or until The Chamber of Secrets issues happened, and Dumbledore began his ‘throwing Harry under the bus’ phase.....which was still ongoing, as it were.

“He had his moments, as sparingly as they were.” They had resumed walking, and were now up to the fifth floor. The twins walked Claudia to her Lounge door.

“We seem to have taken a turn toward the serious in this conversation.”

“We did, but that’s okay. It’s interesting to hear about Harry from another perspective, and from people that have known him for so long. We don’t have that kind of drama here, usually.”

“Be very glad for that Claudia Jean, trust us on that one. So we can tell Lee that this weekend would be good?”

“Sure, but in a group, like you suggested.”

“Gotcha. And there won't be any pressure or nagging, don't worry. We want this to go well if it goes well, and go nowhere if it's meant to do that.”

“Gosh, thanks.”

“Our good deed for the month, don't get used to it. See you at dinner.” They headed toward the stairwell as Claudia stood there with a wry grin on her face. She liked these guys, a few of the mysteries of Harry had been somewhat solved by her getting to know Fred and George better. A Sophomore passed her, with purple hair, and the rare sight of Claudia Jean Cregg giggling like the 17 year old girl that she was could be seen as she made her way back to the Shawnee Lounge.

Saturday, April 12, 1997

Harry's Trunk

6:00 pm

The gang and friends were all assembled for a get together, with Lee Jordan and Claudia Cregg providing the entertainment for the evening. Well there was music and such for the 'official' entertainment, but the Lee/Claudia setup was the reason they were all there. This was the first time that Lee had met any of the gang, not having been on that island that weekend, nor at the Weasleys for Christmas. So he spent the first hour just trying to keep everyone straight in his mind. He and Warrick spent some time together, only for Lee to find out that Warrick hated hip-hop, which was a new fad of Lee's. Angelina and Alicia joined them soon after, complaining about their sleep getting interrupted, and the trunk was quite full of teenagers and barely adult grown-ups.....and Fred and George, who were in between. After awhile they split into a couple of groups and spent time playing cards, and Claudia and Lee sat next to each other and kind of got acquainted.

It should be said that Dobby was not allowed to play in the game, as the others wanted to see how good they actually were without him

stomping on them. He was paid off with two pairs of socks and a purple beret that Lee had found in a muggle store in London, and instead played waiter, with the occasional kibitz for Harry and his hands. Harry started winning, so the howls of protest finally silenced Dobby from his advisory role.

Halfway through, Harry raised his Dr. Pepper and proposed a toast:

“To Anthony Hook, owner and operator of Trunkenstein! Thanks to him and his totally illegal and against the law trunk floo system, good friends can stay good friends, no matter how many kilometers there are between them. Salud!” Everyone else raised their glasses.

“Salud!”

Soon the gang was spread out over the four rooms of the trunk, for conversation purposes of course.....well except for Reiko and Warrick, who found a quiet corner and a pair of Disillusionment Charms. Just an experiment, to see if it was feasible in a setting like this. Fortunately for them, Harry was in a non-tormenting mood. Lee and Claudia sat plainly in the middle of the living room, next to each other on the couch.

“So what do you think you’ll do after here?”

“I’ll go to college, with the others. I don’t know after that really.”

“You’ll stay in the muggle world?”

“Probably, unless I can get a good job in ours. What about you? Are you wedded to the shop?”

“For the time being, sure. The guys pay really well, and it’s not a lot of hard work. It doesn’t stretch my mind, that’s the one downside, but it’s a nice way to make a living.”

“Have you ever thought about going to college?”

“I don’t know, I’ve considered it a few times, but things are going so well now that I don’t want to screw them up. I’m saving my money though, it’s possible. We don’t have scholarships for Wizards like you do over here.”

“That is a benefit, Sophie and I would be lost without ours for here.”

They went on in this vein for quite a while, letting personal details leak out, and telling Great Lakes and Hogwarts stories. Claudia caused some people to look their way when she burst out laughing after hearing the niffler story. The evening ended at around midnight, thankfully Lee had taken a nap earlier, and didn’t have to work the next day. As he prepared to floo back, Lee looked at Claudia.

“This was cool, I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you.”

“Likewise Lee, the twins have some good ideas.” Yes they did, Lee thought with some wonder. In all their years as friends, the two had never tried to set him up with a woman before, but for some reason they had been pushing this. Fred and George both had sworn up and down though that this was not for laughs in the slightest, and he believed them.

“So would you like to do something next week?”

“Sure, that sounds great. I’m sure that Harry will let us use the trunk again.” Harry had already assured Lee that he could use it whenever he wanted, as long as he cleaned up after himself.....if you get the meaning. Lee could already tell that that wouldn’t be an issue with Claudia anytime soon, but he was digging her all the same.

“He’s pretty generous with his things, yeah. I’ll pop by later next week and we can figure it out, see what we’re in the mood for at that particular time.”

“That’s a plan. Well goodnight Lee.

“Goodnight Claudia.” They awkwardly did a hug, and Lee did not try to kiss her. He flooed off to the shop, and then to home. Claudia duly

ignored the smiles being thrown her way as she went up through the ladder to Harry and Warrick's room.

Where she was greeted with anything but the sounds of silence, as Rick and Terry had their girlfriends over, and one of the pairs had forgotten the Silencing Charms. Or maybe they hadn't, the two guys weren't above getting their digs in at the trunk gang that they weren't invited to join. She was smiling though, as she left, it had been a good night. Those British guys.

Claudia and Lee would double date with Warrick and Reiko the following week, and there definitely seemed to be a connection between the two. Claudia was charmed by his accent and carefree attitude, which was just different enough from Fred and George to be attractive to her. And he was hot, or at least she thought so. That was not a small factor. They dated once a week for the rest of the month, and after a lot of teasing, Claudia finally admitted that they were a couple. Future events would bring them in close proximity sooner rather than later, but that's a tale for another time.

Sunday, April 13, 1997

Harry's trunk

Noon

Dear Harry,

Thanks for your letter yesterday, I'm sorry it took me until today to respond, but things around here are a little crazy. I'm not sure what other intelligence gathering services you have around here right now, so I'll just assume that you get all your information from our letters.

We won yesterday in Quidditch, finally beating Hufflepuff, 310-120. I'm the very proud catcher of the Snitch thank you very much, it felt really good to end that losing streak. It dates back awhile I remember, through bad luck, Dementors, and Hag Grand Inquisitors. Ron played pretty well in goal, he stopped more shots than the Hufflepuff Keeper did anyway. He's no Oliver Wood still, and probably never will be, but he might just be the best Keeper this year. You have to know how

painful that was for me to admit Harry. Katie Bell scored 13 goals, all but three of our total, she was terrific. She says hi by the way, she can't wait to play with or against you professionally. I didn't tell her that that might be a no-go, everyone here just assumes you're coming back after graduation. I'm not trying to fish for information or anything, just letting you know some of the scuttlebutt here.

Slytherin took out Ravenclaw in the back half of the doubleheader, as Dumbledore called it. We played our game at 1:00 pm and the second game started 30 minutes after ours finished. He said that the back to back games were for security reasons, that many people in one place for two consecutive weekends was asking a bit much of Auror Command and The Dark Force Defense League. The players had a meeting about it, and while a few people objected, we voted to do as the old man wanted. Its not like we had much of a say, Dumbledore announced it without talking to us first, but I guess we could have always just not played. Anyhow, Slytherin won 180-160, though your good friend Cho got the Snitch. She didn't play Draco, and it turned out to be a disaster, as the Ravenclaw Chasers only scored one goal. Let's just say that Slytherin played the game as if they had a point to prove, and maybe she was afraid that they would go after him or something. The Slytherin Seeker was some guy named Don Post, a third year that I'd never heard of until yesterday, and he didn't stand a chance against Cho. Slytherin is now in first place in the standings, followed by us, then Ravenclaw. If we beat Slytherin by enough points next time, we can take the Cup.

I said 'your good friend Cho' earlier, because she apparently blames you for the Howlers that your girlfriend and her people sent. I got this from Draco of all people, who just wanted you to know. He doesn't talk about you much, he avoids the subject if at all possible at our rogue DA meetings, but I guess he couldn't resist. Malfoy isn't making waves, or friends either, in our meetings, but he's contributing as much as anyone. I still don't trust the little ferret, and I hope you don't either Harry, something about this whole thing just smells a little too rank for my comfort. The Slytherins haven't gone after him yet, but we all know it's a matter of time. Their House is kind of divided right now from what we hear. Some of them see Draco's decision as the practical one, the rest see it as a betrayal. As if Voldemort would take in a werewolf, no matter what his family ties. I mean honestly Harry.

There's still no Diagon Alley trip planned, or anything of the like, even though Sloper says that he and Cho are working on the old man and McGonagall. I don't know how much to believe that though, Sloper is a little too much in love with the perks of being Head Boy to really go toe to toe with Dumbledore over much of anything. It makes me wonder if that's going to cost Hermione the Head Girl slot next year, they could always give it to Padma Patil or Hannah Abbott. We all assume Justin Finch-Fletchley or Anthony Goldstein will be Head Boy, Ron doesn't have much of a shot with his grades, and Dumbledore can't be so stupid as to appoint a Dark Slytherin as Head Boy, no matter how studious Theo Nott seems to be on the surface. Pansy Parkinson isn't even worth talking about, though she doesn't cozy up to Nott like she did Draco.

I should wrap this up, Dobby is tapping his foot a little impatiently. He really is nervous about being around here, as if he thinks Dumbledore will use him to punish you or something. I would like to say that Ron and Hermione send their love, but they don't talk about you in front of me, good or bad. That's something I suppose, the no bad part. Oh, Dean says to tell you hello, and that Crystal Palace is nothing compared to West Ham. Whatever that means.

We miss you Harry, talk to you soon,

Ginny

That was the longest letter Ginny had ever written him, which made Harry feel better about all of that over there. He would have to talk to the twins about sneaking over to see the final Quidditch game, it would be a hoot either way. Dumbledore wouldn't be expecting something like that, would he?

He walked upstairs to his room, only to see that Terry had been snared in the twins' latest escapade, abetted by Jonas and Drew: he was hopping everywhere he went. Somehow the twins had gained access to the kitchen area, a specialty of theirs, and had loaded the morning bacon. Not that many students ate breakfast on Sunday mornings, but those that did could be seen rabbiting their way to their Sunday routines. The Jefferson Marauders had come up with the

spells, and acted as lookouts. The house-elf staff, now led by major-domo Akti, were instantly taken by the twins, who told them all about British house-elves, and how Dobby and Winky were really not representative of them. This was done while they were loading up the bacon, and the American elves gained a further appreciation for how good they had it. They also understood a little of Dobby's strangeness now, and it would result in him having more friendly relations with the rest of the staff.

The hopping only lasted four hours, and Murray fielded only a few complaints about it, and one of those was from someone who had fallen over a fallen hopper. She told them to be more careful about what they ate in the future, particularly given that there was no time delay on this one. No one hopped in their seats, but still.

The rest of the week would be a smorgasbord of light pranks, nothing that would piss off Murray or Heyman, or cause them to mention specifics to Molly and Arthur, whose visit was coming the first weekend in May.

On Monday, various spots on the fourth floor were loaded with Sticking Charms. The spots were totally random, and even Sophie got nailed by one.....and in front of a lot of people to boot. Her loud swearing/acting led to suspicion that there were copycats around. There weren't of course, Reiko and Warrick had placed the spots willy nilly, Reiko herself had caught the edge of her shoe on one early on. The sticky experiment was ended after there were complaints about shoes being damaged. Reparo worked well, but there were still complaints.

Tuesday saw random dorm room doors in all four Houses partially sealed shut. Ray Elwood was recruited to help in Proctor, to complete the effect and confuse people, as it was known that the Harry gang had no Proctor members. The doors could be opened, just with a lot of elbow grease. This lasted all day, and some students were even taken to leaving their doors open. Heyman got his first turbo-charged gang exposure, as he was sent to them by Murray to request that this prank, while amusing, not be repeated.

Wednesday was another food day, as Fred and George loaded up the orange juice. The result was students belching out their words for the rest of the morning, and let yourselves be assured that orange juice does not smell good coming out the other way. The belching dissipated as the OJ ran through the kids' systems, though curiously the faculty skipped their morning rations of juice. The twins, not wanting to put up with any belching lectures, had tipped them off ahead of time. Anonymously of course.

On Thursday everyone took the day off from pranking, just to play with peoples' heads. It was fun watching people cringing every time they ate or drank something though. High entertainment.

Friday was the final pranking day of the week, and Reiko and Drew charmed various pieces of paper to drift around the halls, attaching themselves to peoples' backs. Yes, 'kick me' was one of them, but also 'kiss me', 'yell at me' and 'smack me on the back of the head'.....it was Reiko, what did you expect. For their parts, Harry and Sophie used magical voice disguisers and went around the halls yelling at the top of their lungs.

At 4:00 am.

Again, the faculty living there had been warned that something was going down in the wee hours, so Silencing Bubbles were spread all along the third floor. The two of them walked really quickly, and while they were almost caught a couple of times by early risers, they emerged unscathed.

Jonas and Drew satisfied themselves with messing with the three televisions in the Jefferson Lounge, they turned the volume buttons up all the way, and froze them. They also fiddled with the plugs and on/off switches, so that the plugs couldn't be pulled out nor the buttons turned off.

Claudia, letting her inner comedienne out, simply wrote on the main Shawnee Lounge wall: "Be good, or the Marauders will get you!" It had the proper effect, and everyone flinched a little bit as they walked through the Lounge door, waiting for the crap to happen. Which it never did, at least none by Claudia.

Fred and George simply walked around with big smiles on their faces, taking full credit for the mayhem, with the rest of the Marauders' hearty permission. The faculty just shook their heads in amusement.....as they scanned their food for booby traps at every meal. Jonas had the afternoon off, and he put up in large words on the Dining Hall walls.

“You will have the weekend off from mayhem. Probably.”

They would, and it would last longer than anyone had thought.

Sunday, April 26, 1997

Great Lakes Inner Perimeter

2:00 pm

Sophie and Harry were taking a stroll outside, basking in the first really nice weather of the season. They were hand in hand and headed toward the Athletic Field, after which the Inner Perimeter began the Outer Perimeter, and that was considered out of bounds with the new security restrictions. The first part of the walk had been spent idly discussing colleges, and where to apply. Then Harry brought things to a different topic, one that he had been secretly planning for almost a month.

“Sophie, we need to talk about this summer.” She looked confused at first.

“What about it?” They were staying at Great Lakes weren't they? Not so fast Sophie.

“I don't think I'm going to stay here in July, I want to go back to Britain for a time.” That hit her like a ton of bricks.

“What do you mean? I thought we were all going to hang out here, except when Jonas is at Quodpot training.” Jonas had already gotten word that he would be working out with the national team again this

summer. He was considered a lock to make the next World Cup team, particularly given the February deaths of Ryan Chappelle and Art Hailey.

“Well that’s the plan for August right now.....but I need to do some things over there, and get some training and the like. But with you there, if you want to come with me.” This was a lot to hit her with at once.

“I really don’t know what to say.”

“Well you could say ‘sure Harry, I would love to go to Britain with you for a month’.” That got her focused in a hurry.

“Well of course I want to be where you are!” He squeezed her hand.

“Good, I’m glad that’s settled then. I wonder what’s for dinner tonight?”

“There had better be a lot more to this story Mister.”

“Oh all right, you’re so untrusting. I sent a letter to Gringotts yesterday, through Dobby, asking about the status of Godric’s Hollow.”

“Where you were born?” See, she did pay attention.

“Right, and Fortrap, who manages my account there, sent back an immediate reply about it, our goblin friends don’t go in for time off I guess. You were in the library with Claudia and Reiko at the time in case you were wondering. Anyway, the house and environs are under Fidelius, with my favorite person in the entire world as Secret Keeper.”

“Oh boy, I can tell this won’t end well.”

“Well for once you’re wrong, sort of. All I need is a Ministry decree to get Fidelius taken off, and I have a hunch that Minister Scrimgeour

will accommodate me on this, especially since it will piss off Dumbledore.”

“Always a good thing.”

“You better believe it, he won’t be happy about it, though Rufus will get a kick out of it I’m sure. Always put Dumbledore in his place, I can just hear him saying that.. So I was thinking that you and I, and any of the others who want to come, and Fred and George of course, would all live there, while I do my business.”

“And what business is that?” Harry had never broached this kind of thing before.

“I need some dueling training, the real thing this time.”

“We get that in Basic Combat though.”

“Not like what I need. I need to know advanced moves and tactics, and have people I can practice with, seriously. I know you and I work out, and the twins and I do some workouts when you’re off doing other stuff.....but there’s a part of me, not so small, that holds back on you three. I can’t do all that I can do, because I’m worried about one of you getting hurt by accident.” Sophie had noticed this, but didn’t want to ask Harry to turn up the volume. True, she didn’t want to get hurt herself, but she also didn’t want that on Harry’s conscience.

“Can’t the Aurors here help you? I mean they know you pretty well by now because of the Commission don’t they?”

“I’m sure they could up to a point, but the Aurors here don’t have a lot of experience dealing with Dark Wizards, and I need that, big time. I mean, no disrespect intended to Ripley or Greenleaf, but I could probably take either of them down in a fair fight, and I don’t mean to sound arrogant when I say that.”

“Well from anyone else it would probably come off that way, but the rest of the class pretty much agrees with you.”

“Well I wouldn’t get caught dead saying that to anyone but you. So anyhow, Ripley is considered one of the top guys, and if I could take him.....I mean Voldemort would go through those guys like a hatchet through a loaf of hot bread. The British Aurors wouldn’t fare much better, but they have more experience firsthand if you will, and can give me a lot of do’s and don’ts.”

“And Travis and Scrimgeour owe you for Draco.”

“Well no, they paid on that one. Sales of WWW stuff at Hogwarts is doubled now that the Filch ban is taken away. It was worth it for that alone. Add that to the Avada Kedavra privileges, though I did that for the twins more than anything, since they’ll be living over there next year. No, I’m talking about me joining the League and being their pinup boy for a time. I’ll deal that in exchange for a serious battery of private lessons from any current and former Aurors who have a lot of experience fighting Death Eaters, and maybe Voldemort himself back in the day.”

“What about that Moody guy the twins were telling us about?”

“No, his allegiance is to Dumbledore, with a grain or five of salt I’m sure. I can’t have Dumbledore interfering with me on this, or anything else. He’ll either try to kidnap me back to Grimmauld Place, or put some other roadblock in front of me.”

“But he’ll know you’re back in Britain if you do the thing with the Hollow.”

“That’s all he’ll know, Travis will make sure that the guys tutoring me are not Dumbledore loyalists, he can’t stand our old Headmaster any more than I can.” Both Harry and Sophie were thinking, to some degree, that if Dumbledore and Harry were to meet.....maybe that wouldn’t be so bad, since Harry’s idea of a good meeting would involve both his wands and a trip to St. Mungos for the old man.

“Have they agreed to do this?”

“Well you’re the first one I’ve talked to about it, not counting Dobby and Fortrap, and they only know that one detail.” Sophie, though she knew Harry loved her, was not a little flattered that he had told her before the twins.

“So this would be for just July?”

“That’s the idea, a month of solid training, followed by a month of actual vacation, and maybe some travel here in the States. I need to do this Sophie, the war won’t be over until Voldemort and I have our little showdown, and I’m just not ready.”

“So whomever dies, their side loses?”

“I don’t know about our side, but I think if I take down Voldemort, Rufus will make sure that the surviving Death Eaters get dealt with.”

“But your side won’t give up if you lose?” Harry voiced a theory that he had not shared with anyone else before.

“I don’t know, it all depends on whether or not Dumbledore really believes in that Prophecy. If he doesn’t, if this was all some kind of ruse, then he’ll get a new figurehead and fight on, like he always has. If he does believe, then he might well just give up and let Voldemort take over. Rufus might be able to hold it together without Dumbledore, but I doubt it.”

“Then you should get that training Harry, I’ll support you in any way that I can.” He hugged her tightly, as a few other walkers gave them a passing glance and kept on going.

“Thank you, I was really hoping you would say something like that and come with me. You’ll help me sell this to the others?” This was going a lot better than he had been fearing it would.

“Of course, we’ll all be 17 by then and able to do magic outside school.”

“Yeah, about that. I’m going to have you guys tutored as well by those guys, though probably not as hardcore as I’ll be getting it. You especially will be a target when you’re out in public, they’ll figure out who you are soon enough, particularly when we’re in public together.”

“Good, it will expand on what we’ve been doing together.....the defense stuff Mister, don’t get that look on your face.”

“Why I don’t know what you’re on about Sophie, you don’t need any tutors for ‘that’.” She started giggling and blushing at the same time.

“Thank you, I think.”

“We’ll start with the others when we get back, I know the twins will go along with it.”

“I’m sure the others will too, except for Jonas of course.”

“We’ll figure out how to get him there for a visit or two when he gets time off.” Sophie went quiet for a minute, as they started to head back to school.

“Are you sure about this? I mean the training and things?”

“Oh heck yes, I’ve waited too long if anything. If I had it to do over I would have done it last summer, I would have paid for a tutor to come to Great Lakes.” There was no pause in that last sentence, otherwise it would have come off very, very badly. Thankfully, Sophie caught that, and didn’t murder him on the spot. She had one thought though:

“When do you want to tell the others?”

“Now seems like as good a time as any. Dobby!” The little fellow popped in.

“Yes Harry?”

“Please ask the others to assemble in the trunk as soon as possible, we need to have a meeting. You and Winky too, this concerns you two just as much. It’s nothing bad, I don’t think.” Dobby was pretty quick for an.....well for anyone.

“Is this about Godric’s Hollow Harry?”

“Yes, but don’t mention that to any of them, let them get it cold, like my darling lady just did.” Dobby nodded and popped away. The two of them walked slowly back, both to give the others time to get to the trunk, and just because it was more romantic that way. Harry had been very sensitive about that kind of thing since the big event on Sophie’s birthday, and made sure that Sophie could not fault him on that score. And no, it was not because he wanted the gravy train to continue, though he certainly did.....he genuinely cared about making Sophie feel special.

By the time they arrived in the twins’ room, everyone was there, having been summoned from various Lounges, and the twins themselves were in the trunk already, working. Warrick, who had been about to sneak away with Reiko for some quality time, opened things up:

“So what’s this all about? I thought we were meeting tonight to talk about the pranks for the week.” Harry had quite forgotten about that, and it showed on his face. While smiling, Reiko got out:

“Well we’re here now, what do you want to tell us?” Harry recovered, and went into his spiel, one that was much like the one he gave Sophie, and doesn’t really bear repeating here. Everyone was quiet for a bit, though the twins had started nodding their agreement from Harry’s first pause for breath. Fred spoke first:

“Well I’m in, that sounds like a great idea. Well ideas, the training and the opening up of your house.”

“Well, our house Fred, you and George are welcome there as long as you want, past this summer. Travis was there for my parents’ wedding back in the day, and he said that there were five bedrooms

and three baths, as well as a nice sized downstairs and so on. So plenty of room." A couple of house-sitters wouldn't be so bad, and he could count on them not to trash the place.

"I'm with brother Fred, sounds like a plan." Warrick and Reiko looked at each other, and seemed to come to an understanding.

"We're in."

"Yes we are, I like it, kind of like an exchange program almost."

"Except that we don't have to go near Hogwarts."

"Which you have not made into a nice sounding place Harry, and Fred and George." Harry was just staring at them, but Drew beat him to it.

"Did they put something in our food today, you were just channeling the twins there."

"Yeah, that's our shtick you two, we don't allow people to mimic us. Without punishment anyway."

"Fine, fine, we won't do it anymore. But Reiko and I are in. Claudia?" She liked the idea in theory, but had a couple of slight quibbles.

"Well as long as Professor Murray will let us do half a summer here, sure. I hate to bring this up, but you'll be financing this thing? I mean this is a lot of mouths to feed you know."

"It'll be fine Claudia, and there's no problem with you bringing it up, don't worry. Bed and board will be taken care of." George had a thought to throw in on that subject.

"And you all can pull a few hours here and there in the shop if you want some extra cash. We could teach you guys how to do some manufacturing." This got the attention of Claudia and Sophie in

particular, neither of whom thought that making pranks would be too difficult. Sophie's rapprochement with Mother and Father Weir had not gone so far as to have the spending money spigot turned back on, and Sophie had way too much pride to ask. Drew was the only human who had not weighed in, and all eyes turned to him.

"Well I was going to get some time in with Dad's office, kind of an internship.....but this sounds like fun, so let me just make sure I can do the split thing. If I can, I'm in."

"Outstanding, this is going to be great. Kind of a warm-up for university. Except that it'll be in rural Wales." Fred had a question, and was hesitant to bring it up, but figured that it would be better to do it in front of the large group.

"What about the Hogwarts crowd? Are they going to be let in on this?" And the penny dropped, though all had been wondering during Harry's recruitment spiel, given that he had not mentioned the other Brits in the equation.

"I don't know, I'm still thinking about that one. I was going to wait until I have Rufus's okay for the training, but let's hear what everyone thinks. I'm going to automatically assume that Ginny won't be able to, but the others might. Opinions?" No one really had any, the Americans were all wary of Ron or Hermione, but hesitated to say so. Fred put in his two Knuts.

"Well you're right on Ginny, Mum would never go for it. I would still ask Ginny, just for form, so she doesn't get put out. If you're willing, I would press Ron to do it, see once and for all if you and he are salvageable. You can always kick him out if he acts up, or some of us can give him a well deserved kick in the ass, your pick." Harry got a very thoughtful look on his face.

"That's a great idea Fred, both of them actually. I'll do just that. You're right about Ginny, and the others would be put out too if we all set up house and home in Britain and didn't invite them. I still won't tell them until Rufus sends word back."

“Have you written him already?”

“No Claudia, I wanted to get the pulse of the gang before I did that, and to get an idea of our numbers. Dobby, Winky, how do you feel about putting the ‘house’ back in house elves?”

“We think it is a wonderful idea Harry. Don’t we Winky?”

“Yes Harry, wonderful.” They both looked happy enough, and Harry took a piece of parchment out of his pocket and scribbled a few sentences on the bottom.

“Dobby, please take this to the Minister tomorrow, during their business hours. Ask him if he would like to send a reply back with you. If not, have him owl it to Lee Jordan at the shop.”

“Right Harry.”

Not much more needed to said until Rufus answered, so they decided to have their pranking summit right then, which was a short meeting it turned out. Harry and the twins were all wary of doing anything big with Molly and Arthur coming. They had no worries any longer, the twins at least, about doing any gnome work, but some things just weren’t worth the hassle. The rest of the gang had heard enough cautionary tales about Molly’s prank tolerance to go along with the plan. Harry assured them that the prank faucet would be turned back on after Molly’s departure.

Rufus, as Harry had hoped, sent back his reply the next day with Dobby, it was awaiting Harry when he woke up.

Dear Harry,

I would be more than happy to accommodate your requests, and gratefully accept your interest in joining The Dark Force Defense League. I just sent an order to our friend Albus to take the Fidelius off your house in Wales, and you should know that the penalty for a refusal of that sort is automatic Azkaban time, so I anticipate having good news for you there within a day or so. Your choice of Bill

Weasley to put the house back under Fidelius is a fine one, and we will make the arrangements with him when the time comes.

As to your tutoring proposal, Travis will design a program for you, with my input, and we'll implement it when you come over here. It will be a fairly ambitious training seminar, which I believe will speak to your goals. Your American friends are welcome to participate as much or as little as they wish. I am acquainted with Mitchell Baylor, and if his son is anything like his old man, he'll do fine. If Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, or Luna Lovegood are interested in participating, I will waive the decree of underage magic for them for this purpose, and this purpose alone.

On the matter of your joining The League, I will amend your membership so that you will not have to take any direct or indirect orders from Dumbledore. You barely touched on it in your note, but I thought I would ease your mind there.

As it happens, the Umbridge trial has been set for Monday, June 30. Various Wizengamot members have out of town commitments during May and June, and that's the first time we could get the entire body assembled. I doubt the trial will take any longer than a day, so plan on being there on that day. Amelia will come over as before and get your testimony prepared, probably a week in advance.

On a final note Harry, I will keep this as quiet as I can, but word will get out once Travis recruits your tutors, so be prepared.

I look forward to meeting with you again, have a good rest of your term.

Rufus Scrimgeour

Minster of Magic

Harry, yawning all the way, walked the note down the hall to the twins' room. Fred was just getting out of the shower, and as the twins got dressed, Harry read them the letter.

“Well that was what you wanted, wasn't it?”

“Yep, it couldn’t have gone better. We’re set up for the summer. I’ll write the Hogwarts people this afternoon when I have my free period.” Fred had something on his mind though.

“I just want to make certain that you’re sure about this Harry. This is a full alliance with Rufus Scrimgeour.”

“Just like your dad.” It sure hadn’t hurt Arthur’s career any.

“I know, and to my credit I asked him the same question. He told me that he found it to be a delicious novelty, having a Minister he could respect, that he could look in the eye and not want to laugh in his face.” Harry was all with that. He could imagine laughing ‘with’ Rufus, but not at him.

“There you go, I would like the same thing. Look, I’ve heard the stories, and I’ve seen how easily he’s concentrated power.....but I need someone over there with that kind of power, to back me up. It’s either him or Dumbledore, and we all know how that turned out.” Or maybe you would prefer the Dark option, he didn’t say.

“True, and I’m not arguing with you here. I just want you to be sure in your own mind. You know we’re with you, 100.”

“Thank goodness, I wouldn’t be doing this without you guys.”

“We always back your play Harry, though it helps that your plays seem to work most of the time.”

“It’s a bonus to be sure. I’m going to use the shower in the trunk, Rick’s in ours and he takes forever.” He went downstairs and did his morning routine. He spent Transfiguration mentally composing his letters to the DOM crew, and he wrote them during his free time in the afternoon. He tried hard, as always, to personalize each letter, and had Dobby off with them after a couple of hours. Again, the little fellow had been instructed to wait for replies, if forthcoming, and he had reluctantly agreed. Dobby later told him that he never left

Neville's side the entire time, lest Dumbledore have gotten wind of the new scheme.

Neville and Luna had both written back, on the same letter, that they were interested, pending approval of Neville's grandmother and Luna's father. Harry made a mental note to send another missive to Rufus, so that the man could persuade his childhood roommate. Ginny had written that she would ask her parents about it, and did the invite include Dean? Harry had quite forgotten about Dean, though there were nothing sinister or romantic in his intentions. He just found Dean to be forgettable is all. He would talk that matter over with Fred and George when they came back.

Ron and Hermione had both told Dobby that they needed time to think about it, and that they would write Harry back, through Lee at the shop, when they had a thought on the matter one way or the other. Harry did not take this as a good sign, but then again, he wasn't sure if he wanted either of them there anyway. Ron had already gotten off to an iffy start with the others, and Hermione would likely not react well to having other people her age around that were her intellectual equals at the very least. Well maybe she would, Harry had never gotten that 'I was never challenged' letter from her out of his mind, even though she had apologized for it later. He assumed that he would hear more about this when Arthur and Molly came the next weekend, and this would be proven more than correct.

Two days later, a letter came from Neville saying that he and Luna were on board, though his grandmother and her father both wanted to visit Godric's Hollow on the first day, just to eyeball the situation personally. Likewise Murray had no issue with them splitting their time between Wales and Michigan, provided she got a firm return date. She confessed to Harry that she had found it hard to believe that he would stay cooped up at Great Lakes for an entire summer. The discussion also led somewhere else.

"Harry, if you think it would worthwhile, I would be willing, once a month or thereabouts, to do some one on one tutoring with you. This would be once you return in August, and would augment the training you get from your fellow Brits." Harry had often wondered about asking her for this very thing, but he had always assumed that she

would not have the time for it. He had spoken to Auror in Charge Mike Jacobson once during a bathroom break, and the older man had told him that Murray had an excellent record and reputation in her Auror days, and that he should take seriously any tips she gave him about their profession.

“Of course ma’am, I would be grateful for any help you would be willing to give me.”

“We’ll work out a schedule when you come back, the faculty and I will have the Fall class times ready by then and we can coordinate things.”

“That sounds great ma’am, and thank you.”

“Just promise me one thing.”

“Name it.” Her request was a bit unusual, given who was making it.

“At least one good story about the friction between your American friends and your British ones. I know it’s going to happen one way or the other, and I could probably use the entertainment.” Harry burst out laughing.

“Hopefully you won’t read about it in the newspaper, but consider it done.”

Friday, May 2, 1997

6:00 pm GMT

The Burrow

Molly bustled about, get her valise ready, and one for Arthur too. He was due any minute, as were Bill and Lee, who were closing up the shop for the weekend. Though the four were eagerly looking forward to it, the visit abroad had caused a little controversy up at Hogwarts, as Ginny had wanted to come as well. Molly had vacillated on it, and

just to test the waters, had suggested it to Dumbledore, who would need to sign off on it.

He did not sign off on it, though he turned it down as nicely as possible. He explained that he couldn't show favoritism in allowing a student to take an off-campus trip, particularly given that all such trips were banned as it was. Molly had not really been too enthusiastic about the idea in the first place, feeling that Ginny did not need the temptation of seeing how happy her brothers and would be crush were at their new school. That said, Molly was not totally naïve when it came to strategic thinking, and felt that it would play better if Dumbledore, whom Ginny loathed anyway, was the one to say no. So Molly stayed somewhat clean in Ginny's eyes, while the young Weasley plotted revenge against her no-longer-beloved Headmaster.

Bill and Lee came through the front door, having Apparated to the edge of the zone, and then walked in. Neither of them had any baggage with them, part of their duties at the shop had been sending it through the trunk floo. Not that Arthur or Molly needed to know about that.

"Are you boys ready? Arthur should be here any second." They couldn't see the family clock from where they stood, but it had changed to show Arthur traveling. He tumbled out of the floo before anyone could say anything else.

"All right then, let's get this show on the road, as the muggles say."

"You have the portkeys dear?"

"Right here in my pocket, from here to Iceland, then from Iceland to Boston. Just how the twins got there, or so I'm told."

"Where are we leaving from?"

"I thought we would just walk a little ways to the edge of the wards here. No need to use the floo or Apparate, a nice walk will do us good." Nods all around, as the four of them locked up the house and slowly walked to their departure point. All of them were excited to see

the school that they had been hearing so much about, and to experience another Quidditch game with the twins and Harry in it, something they all thought was totally in the past until recently. The hike was only about 10 minutes, and then they took the portkey to Iceland.

Where they did not go outside, but still had a nice view from the loo. Lots of rocks and mountains in Iceland, but the scenery was lovely, and Molly resolved to buy at least one postcard on the trip back. They had a snack in the travel lounge, and an hour later were in the portkey area in Boston. Arthur, as a Senior Department Head in his own government, was given the VIP treatment. He had made arrangements with his American counterpart for a brief meeting during his 'layover', and Molly and the others got to hear directly what Arthur did all day at work, as he and American Muggle Relations Director Daniel Tripp compared notes for almost an hour. A meeting that paid for the portkeys by the way, since Arthur could claim that he was doing some official Ministry business on his trip. After they were done talking shop, Tripp escorted them to his office, where they floored directly to Murray's, which now only accessible to the floos from the other three schools and ones from the government. Harry's trip with the twins back in January, when the twins plan to attend Great Lakes was hatched, was now something that could not happen. Security reasons governed the decision, as they had most restrictions since the attacks.

Murray was waiting for them as they arrived, she was hip deep in paperwork, and usually used Friday to pare the pile down. As Bill, who was first, tumbled out of the floo, she stood up and came around the desk to greet them. Within seconds, all four Brits were brushing themselves off.

"Well even if I wasn't expecting you, I could tell who three of you were just by the hair. Welcome to Great Lakes, I'm Joanne Murray." She shook hands with all four of them.

"Hello Professor, I'm Molly Weasley. This is my husband Arthur, our eldest son Bill, and our very good friend Lee Jordan, who runs the

shop.” Lee, with his dark skin and dreadlocks, was not a Weasley of course, but like Harry, was the next closest thing.

“Pleased to meet you all, and please call me Joanne. I’ve heard much about all of you from Harry and the twins.”

“Fred and George aren’t causing too much chaos I hope?” Both Weasley parents cringed a little bit, and Murray noticed that right away.

“They’re insanely popular with the other students, they fit in right away.” That didn’t answer the question now did it?

“Oh dear, what have they done?”

“Oh nothing, but they and Harry and friends have been quite busy in the pranking department since they arrived. Well I assume it’s them, I don’t ask Harry too many questions, and then he doesn’t have to deny much.” Bill grinned.

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

“That’s about the size of it, your sons and Harry really are quite the trio. Anyhow, the kids are in class right now, I believe Harry is in Advanced Charms and the twins are in Muggle Studies. I talked this over with Harry and we decided that Lee and Bill can bunk in with Fred and George, apparently Harry’s trunk can sleep a couple of people easily enough.” Lee and Bill both fought off temptation to laugh about that, if only Murray knew what that trunk was capable of. Murray continued through their thoughts:

“…..and Molly and Arthur, we have our guest room ready for you. Ironically, it’s the same room that Harry stayed in during August. I have a meeting in 15 minutes with some government types, so I’ll have Riley Poole, our caretaker, show you to your rooms. You can freshen up there, and he’ll take you down to Harry’s Charms class, which will be getting out first.”

“That would be fine Joanne, thank you. And thank you for taking in our sons like you have, the three of them have nothing but nice things to say about the school, and you in particular.” Murray always appreciated hearing things like that from parents, and she could tell that Molly was sincere.

“They’ve added a lot to our mix, that’s for certain.” There was a knock on the door, and Murray shouted for the knocker to come in. It was Riley Poole. Murray introduced the Brits to him.

“Riley has been here since he was 11 years old, there’s nothing about the school that he doesn’t know, he took over as Caretaker the day after he graduated.” Poole, cowed as he was by Murray, had every reason to be nice to the visitors.

“I don’t know half as much as Professor Murray here, she’s too modest, but we’ll let her story stand for now. If you’ll follow me, we’ll go up to the guest room. Why don’t you let me take these suitcases and we’ll be on our way.” Poole didn’t levitate them, he just felt like some exercise. They walked up the east staircase, which had been remodeled into an escalator of sorts, though it didn’t move quite as fast. It was quite a trip at first, pun intended, as Murray had explained to the students that she just wanted to do something different with the new building and all. It was only that staircase though, and Harry made a personal point of never taking it. Just to be different, he explained.

They got to the guest room and Molly and Arthur took a moment to unpack. Lee and Bill took Poole outside for a moment.

“How is the pranking going with the gang?”

“It’s been pretty funny so far, Harry made a deal with Murray it seems, and as long as it’s amusing, she lets it pass.” Both of them paused for a moment to compare Murray and Dumbledore in their minds.....one guess as to who won the comparison.

“Does she know you’re a WWW employee?”

“Hell no, and let’s not change that okay? This is a nice deal for everyone involved and I don’t want to pooch it.”

“Harry never told us how he got you on board.” Poole smiled, this was a story he had never gotten to tell.

“I don’t know how it got into his head to do it, but he was exploring on his own one afternoon and stumbled into my workshop down in the basement. We started talking, and 10 minutes later I had \$200 in my hand and the promise of more every month if I helped him out. It’s been that way ever since.”

“I can tell you that he’s very happy with the arrangement.”

“That’s good to hear, he’s an interesting guy.” Molly and Arthur came out just then, and Poole led them down to the second floor and Charms Classroom E, where Harry’s class was half over, but Maloney was having them work in groups, as was her wont in the last half of each session. Poole tapped on the door, and Maloney came over.

“You must be the twins’ parents, you look just like them.” They got that a lot, if any of his sons favored Arthur the most, it was Fred and George. Molly introduced Bill and Lee.

“Yes we are Professor, we were told to come here first. How is Harry doing in class?”

“He’s doing wonderfully Mrs. Weasley, a true talent. Why don’t you four come on in and say hi.”

“Are you sure we wouldn’t be intruding?”

“Oh no, the lecture’s over, they’re just practicing now.” She led them in, and Harry, who was working with Drew and Jonas, saw them as soon as they came into the room. He walked over with a smile.

“Why am I having flashbacks to the Tri-Wizard tournament? You three coming to see me right before the final task.” Oh my yes, Molly remembered that day all too well.

“Hello Harry dear.” She gave him a hug, and he shook hands heartily with the three men. The rest of the gang, minus Warrick and Claudia who weren’t in the class, came over and greeted the newcomers. Drew had not met any of them, and Lee on the other side had to pretend that he had not either, so there was a lot of ‘nice to meet you, heard so much about you talk’, though quietly so as not to disturb the rest of the class. They went back over to the gang’s corner of the room and caught up for a time. This was the wrong time of day for it, class time wise, but the Brits wanted to see some wandless magic, so Harry and the others put on a small show for them.

It turned out that both Molly and Arthur themselves weren’t half bad at it either, and Bill was miles better than all of them. Maloney had joined them for the ‘exhibition’, this kind of parental visit experience was not uncommon in the Novice and Freshman years, indeed it was kind of encouraged for parents to come up on designated weekends to see where their kids were living and what their classes were like. About half the parents took advantage of it, though rarely did a parental unit go back for a second child and get the tour. After class was over, pretty much everyone came over to get an introduction.....the red hair was a giveaway, since Maloney had not made an announcement or anything.

After class let out, the gang and friends stuck around and chatted about how everyone was doing in their classes. Maloney assured Molly that the twins seemed to be doing their best in class, and despite being a little rusty, were more than holding their own in what was their most challenging class.

“They aren’t disrupting anything are they?” Harry, on behalf of his partners, was starting to get a little irritated with this line of questioning, and so was Bill for that matter.

“Mum, Fred and George are doing fine, just like Professor Maloney said. I’m sure if they were being a bother, the Headmistress would have mentioned something. When you directly asked her to.” Bill, at age 29, had long ago reached an understanding with his mother, and could talk to her this way. Once in awhile.

“You’re right Bill, I’m sorry, I’m just so used to getting letters from teachers about them. I’m very glad that they’re doing so well here. Charms is their best subject after all.” A bit of deft backtracking, but it took the looks off Bill’s and Harry’s faces. They talked for a few more minutes, before Harry checked his watch.

“They’ll be getting out soon, let’s go meet them.” Maloney laughed.

“You can set your watch by Professor Ziegler. Molly, Arthur, it was lovely to meet you. We’ll see you at dinner I hope.” Arthur stood up first.

“Of course, thank you Professor Maloney.” More handshaking, and Harry whispered to Sophie for a second as they filed out of the room. Sophie nodded her head and grabbed Reiko, and the two girls went up to Molly and started grilling her about Ginny, and raising one girl with six brothers. Harry motioned for Jonas and Drew to get between the ladies and him, as he turned angrily to Arthur, and in a low voice:

“Am I going to have to listen to that with all their teachers? ‘They’re not being themselves are they?’ Because if I do Arthur.....well I won’t, I can promise you that.” A sudden chill sprung into the air. Arthur was now very glad that Harry had not been in the office with Murray.....or perhaps he had been, one could never tell if Harry would have a place bugged. The older man had a counter though:

“Harry, if you had any idea of the number of owls we got from Dumbledore and McGonagall over the years about those two. More than the other five combined, in fact triple the other five combined if I was forced to add them up. I’m not saying that she’s right to be so worried like that here, but that’s how we’ve been conditioned, since long before any of us met you.”

“Things change, and we have to change with them Arthur.”

“Yes they do, and while I admire your loyalty to Fred and George, you will not say anything to Molly like you just said to me. I love you like a son Harry, and Molly does to, but with that comes mutual respect. I’ll speak with her, I can promise you that. Fred and George will have no cause to get angry with us while we’re here.” And Arthur knew full well that this was indirectly coming from the twins, who had probably vented to the only people who were likely to take their side: Harry and Lee, who hadn’t looked too pleased during Molly’s worrying either

“Fair enough, I’ll not speak to her like that without further provocation.” That was not what Arthur had meant, but he took it as the best he was likely to get at the present time. Indeed he was pleased on the whole, having seen firsthand time after time how the twins were devoted to Harry, that the loyalty was returned just as much. Harry certainly did not take his brothers for granted.

The group got to Muggle Studies Classroom B just as class was getting out. There were only 11 in the class now, including Fred and George, so the room was empty in no time. They were introduced to Ziegler, who wasn’t much different in style with parents as he was with their kids, very serious, with a dash of sarcasm. He had nice things to say about the twins though, praising their participation in the discussions, and the fact that they weren’t going through the motions with this 10 week sprint to graduation. Maloney had similar sentiments about that, and Molly had rarely been so happy talking to a teacher in her life.

“Thank you Professor Ziegler, I appreciate that.”

“Of course Mrs. Weasley, I’m always delighted to talk with parents and allay their fears.” He gave a small smile, and excused himself.

“You two look very scholarly, this was just what you needed.” Eh? More hackles started to rise, until the three Marauders got a look from Bill. If anyone in the family had control over the twins it was Bill, though he rarely exercised that control.

Still, Fred and George were pleased that she seemed so pleased, so they let it go for now. They went up to Cortez and saw the twins' room, and thankfully, neither Weasley parent asked any questions about the trunk that was sitting off to the side of the room. Fred and George talked about their other classes: Herbology, which they somewhat liked; Defense, which they enjoyed, as it was almost all practical for the Seniors; and Potions, which was welcome simply because Snape wasn't teaching it. Let's just say that respect for the dead was not a theme when they spoke of that part of their curriculum.

They got to the Dining Hall right as dinner started, so that they could reserve the largest table, now being 13 of them. Only Bill, officially, had been to the United States before, and tried American cooking. So fried chicken, cheeseburgers, and baked potatoes were not something normally served in The Burrow, but the others liked it all the same, as a change of pace. Molly and Bill both commented a lot on the difference between Hogwarts and Great Lakes: no robes, smaller tables, students sitting with different Houses, and many, many more. The Brits were introduced to what seemed like half the school, and all of the twins and Harry's teachers came by to introduce themselves. They spoke glowingly of all three of the lads, and most said how much they looked forward to the newcomers competing in the Olympics, which started in just 10 days.

All of this praise rather overwhelmed Molly, and by the end she was reduced to saying how proud she was of all three of them, and pretty much only that. Arthur was watching everyone else, the place seemed to be a lot less tense than Hogwarts as he remembered it. That made up for the lack of atmosphere, he was disappointed at the utilitarianism of the place. Fred and George had written him much the same thing, they missed the castle and its ambience. As Sophie had told Harry on the first day: no one was likely to get lost in the Great Lakes building. A few of the dumber Novices perhaps, but even that lasted maybe one day.

Harry showed them around anyway, and the twins were convincing enough in the library to make Molly even happier. There were only seven weeks to go, and they even claimed to be optimistic about their NEWT's, though they really weren't. This was about graduating, not

getting some high government job afterwards. Fred and George knew that the shop would be a goldmine for years to come, and like Lee, they had been salting away money just in case the war turned badly in Britain and they needed to escape. They were diligent though, in keeping 1/3 of the money set aside for Harry's share, and quite a bit was piling up in the special bank account. One in Canada, which Harry knew all about, just for the record. It's not that the twins thought that Harry would lose the final battle with Voldemort if it came to it, but they were worried that The Ministry and Dumbledore would botch things so badly that there never would be a final battle.

Saturday, May 3, 1997

Casa de Fred and George, Great Lakes version

9:30 am

Harry, Warrick, and the twins were all sitting down, keying themselves up for what was to come. They had eaten a quick, Winky made, breakfast a little while before, but did not socialize with the rest of the House. In her room, Reiko was busy giving Keeper Jane Abbott a pep talk, the younger girl had heard so much about Sally Jenkins that she was a tad nervous. Reiko kept telling her over and over:

"Harry, Fred, and George will handle her, don't you worry. They can take care of it." The fact that Reiko believed this was just icing on the cake. It had the right effect, as Abbott was only marginally panicked, rather than fully panicked, as she had been before the Proctor game back in October.

Harry finally stood up, after looking at his watch.

"It's time guys, let's go." They walked over to the Lounge, where Geyser and the rest of the team was waiting for them. Geyser was probably the most nervous of them all. This lineup switch was quite risky, taking the best player in the school and switching positions with him, and to team him up with two guys who had never played a game at Chaser before was even worse. Still, a month of practice had

convinced him that this was a good idea, sort of. The rest of the House was already in the stadium or en route, so the eleven of them, four reserves mind you, made the walk over by themselves in relative silence. They saw the Jefferson crew taking a different line in their stroll to the stadium, but no gestures or trash talking were exchanged. The teams arrived and waited for the introductions. Geyser gave one last reminder.

“Chasers, you’re on your own today, remember that, Warrick and I will be totally concentrating on their Seeker. They don’t have a reserve, so if we can Bludger him out of the game, they’re in big, big trouble. Jane, just do your best against Jenkins, we’re about to find out if the Brits really are the best at Quidditch. Good luck, and let’s take it home.” They all slapped hands and waited for the introductions.

The announcer this day would be History Professor Josh Lyman, whose lot had not been drawn back in October, and had requested the first Harry/twins game. No one had objected, since that lessened their own chances for being chosen for a future game, and Lyman dug into the gig with gusto.

“Welcome everyone to the second sports weekend of the school year! Today is Quidditch day, and our early game matches the two winners from last October, the first place squad from Jefferson, and trailing them only slightly in points, Cortez House. It’s been over six months since those games, so let’s introduce our players again:”

“From Jefferson:”

“At Keeper, a Senior from Boston, Massachusetts: Bill Simmons!” Simmons’ mother taught Muggle Studies at Salem, hence the school switch.

“At Captain and Seeker, a Senior from Houghton, Michigan: Norman Chad!”

“At Beater, a Sophomore from Anderson, Indiana: DJ Gallo!”

“At Beater, a Junior from Covington, Kentucky: Tom Friend!”

“At Chaser, a Transition from St. Paul, Minnesota: Marc Stein!”

“ At Chaser, an Apprentice from Springfield, Illinois: Christine Brennan!” Christine and Sophie, despite being from the same hometown, had not known each other in elementary school, and were not close.

“And at Chaser, a Transition from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and your reigning Player of the Year, Sally Jenkins!”

Jenkins and Simmons got the biggest rounds of applause from the crowd as they flew around the stadium, being the best player and most popular player, respectively. Simmons was actually a good flyer himself, and both players had been tapped to play in the following day's Quodpot game, replacing fallen heroes Ryan Chappelle and Art Hailey. Therefore it was in their best interests to make this a relatively short game, and Chad had been so informed, though he had not been considered a very good Seeker in the past. This was a weak year for the position though, Harry excepted, and the Jefferson Captain was arguably number two behind the newcomer.....not that the newcomer was playing Seeker this year anymore.

“And now for Cortez!”

“At Keeper, a Freshman from Whitewater, Wisconsin: Jane Abbott!”

“ At Seeker, a Junior from Alice Springs, Oklahoma: Reiko Aylesworth!” Quite the buzz in the crowd when that little lineup change was revealed, the secrecy had worked.

“At Captain and Beater, a Senior from Minneapolis, Minnesota: John Geyser!”

“At Beater, a Junior from Indianapolis, Indiana: Warrick Forrester!”

Lyman now paused, and everyone knew what was coming next:

“And at Chaser, it’s the British Invasion!” A roar went up from the crowd.....well not the Jefferson part of it. Fred and George had been assumed by all around to be on the team in some way, but they were still geeked. The Weasleys and Lee, sitting with Sophie in the Cortez section of the stands were yelling at the top of their lungs.

“A Senior from Ottery St. Catchpole, England: Fred Weasley!”

“A Senior from Ottery St. Catchpole, England: George Weasley!”

“A Junior, from Godric’s Hollow, Wales: Harry Potter!”

The Cortez players flew out to the cheers from Cortez, Proctor, and Shawnee, and polite applause from Jefferson. Lyman seemed pretty excited himself as he continued.

“Today’s guest referee is Shawn Respert, who just completed his third season for the Melbourne Magpies of the Australasian Quidditch Association.” Respert was a graduate of Pathfinder, but made his off season home in the Detroit suburbs. He gave the talk to Geyser and Chad, who had been playing against each other for years, and the teams got ready for the Quaffle toss.

“And the Quaffle is up, Harry Potter takes it and shoots right at Simmons in goal, the Weasleys are right behind him, blocking the Jefferson Chasers.....he shoots.....no, it’s blocked by Simmons, but right back at Harry, who flips it at the right-side goal, 10 points for Cortez!” The crowd had never really stopped cheering, and Dr. Carter, who was a big Quidditch fan, made a mental note to stock up on throat lozenges as soon as he got back to the med station.

“Jenkins has the Quaffle, she streaks toward the Cortez goal, oh wait, the twins are bracketing her and she tried to pass out of it to Brennan, but Harry steals the Quaffle and he’s gone, no one is within 10 meters of him.....score! 10 more points for Cortez!” Fred and George had not so much as made a slight contact with Jenkins, but they had interfered enough to make her give up the Quaffle.....which happened the next possession as well, as the

Cortez strategy was to let someone other than Jenkins have the Quaffle.

This exposed the major Jefferson weakness, but one that had never been remotely exploited until now: Sally Jenkins was the equivalent of an NBA point guard, one who didn't really like giving up the ball in crunch time.

Or any other time.

She was the Quidditch version of Allen Iverson.....without the tattoos and guns of course.....well probably without the tattoos, one never knows.

After 10 minutes, Cortez was up 100-0 and Brennan and Stein had still barely touched the Quaffle, as Jenkins seemed determined to play her own, regular, game no matter what the hell strategy Cortez tried on her. So Fred and George became her shadows, not letting her do very much at all, while Harry simply cherry picked and waited for the Quaffle to come loose. Shawnee and Proctor players, past and present, were in the stands going 'now why the hell didn't we think of that?', not realizing that Jenkins was such a good flyer that it took the talents of Fred and George both to keep her in line. Respert had still not called a foul on either team yet, though that was probably because neither Stein nor Brennan could catch Harry, let alone smash into him.

"And Harry has the Quaffle, poor Simmons has to face what amounts to a penalty shot again.....whoa, there's a Bludger.....Harry does a.....well I don't know what the heck that was, he went under broom for a second as the Bludger passed right over him. He's behind the hoops and lets loose a long pass to Weasley, I don't know which one, and he shoots, scores! 110-0 for Cortez as a non-Potter scores his first goal. Timeout by Norman Chad, as Jefferson tries to regroup."

The Cortez team flew down to the middle of the field. Everyone was smiling, and Geyser couldn't find anything to bitch about really. The Snitch had made one brief appearance, but neither Chad nor Reiko were anywhere near it when it did.

“Warrick, we really need to get rid of Chad.” Warrick looked at his partner incredulously.

“Why’s that so urgent now?”

“Because the crowd might be getting bored with Harry tormenting Simmons and we need to distract them, otherwise they might start throwing things.”

“What’s the mercy rule again?”

“It’s 500 points up, not counting the Snitch. So we have a ways to go.” The whistle sounded, and the players were back in the air.

The new Jefferson strategy, if one wants to call it that, was a systematic targeting of Harry, both with Bludgers and Chasers. Friend and Gallo started ignoring Reiko, and each time they got a shot at Harry, they took it. Every time he got the Quaffle, Jenkins and her cohorts tried to slam into him, taking advantage of the fact that while they weren’t too big, neither was Harry. The problem with this is that only Jenkins could actually catch Harry.....but the twins could catch her, and the fouls started a coming. A raft of penalty shots finally got Jefferson on the board, but at the cost of the situation becoming much like two seven year old boys playing with a frog.

And we all know what happens to the frog, every time.

“Oh man, another Weasley foul on Jenkins. Jeez, anytime anyone looks at Harry they start getting violent. Can someone get me some bodyguards like that at our next faculty meeting? Sally lines up for her penalty shot.....she misses! Not a lot of pop in that shot, the Jefferson brilliance of trying to ram Harry sure isn’t working too well is it? The score is still 160-40 for Cortez.”

So the Jefferson strategy was abandoned, and things went back to the way they were. Only 20 minutes had gone past, and the Jefferson cheering section was starting to quiet down some, except for the Quodpot players in the stands, who were now.....very loudly...

...cursing Captain Norman Chad for exposing Sally to the not-so-gentle retaliations of the twins and risking her status for the game on Sunday. Harry quickly went into playmaker mode, feeding the twins for a goal apiece and taking another for himself.

“Hang on, there’s the Snitch! Chad goes into a dive, with Aylesworth right behind him, if Chad gets the Snitch it’s a tie game.....wait, Geyser and Forrester both have Bludgers coming at them.....uh oh, paging Dr. Carter, they’re heading right for Chad now.....the first one hits him on the leg and spins him around.....right into the second one, right in his groin area. I sure hope he’s wearing a cup or something. Injury time-out on the field, Jefferson has five minutes to get back into the air.” Carter did indeed hurry down to the field to check out Chad. Reiko had been just far enough behind not to get hit by any ricocheting Bludgers or people, and chased the Snitch for about 10 more seconds before it disappeared, but the whistle then sounded and she flew off to huddle with the rest of her squad.

“Well you have a slight fracture in your leg Norman, and that groin muscle is going to be heavily bruised. An inch to the left.....” The look on his patient’s face stopped the rest of that sentence. Jefferson had two reserve Chasers and a reserve Keeper, and Chad weakly pointed at one of the Chasers.

“Dan, you go in as Chaser. Christine, you play Seeker.” Freshman Dan Wetzal was the number one reserve Chaser, though he was nowhere near the level of Marc Stein, the weakest starter. Chad had one more salient point:

“And whatever you do, stop fouling Potter, or his bodyguards are going to murder one of you.” Sage advice, and it was taken with due seriousness.

They got back into the air, and the next 10 minutes saw 12 Cortez goals to none for Jefferson, as Harry was now twisting the knife and refusing to shoot, all he did was play setup man for the twins.

“And another goal for Weasley, whichever one. Rumor has it that Harry can tell them apart, and is willing to sell the secret for

someone's firstborn child. I asked Harry about this and he didn't deny it, so get your bids in now.....another goal for Weasley, as Harry steals the Quaffle and lays it up for Weasley, whichever one. The score is now 330-40, as our British friends are having the proverbial field day.....another goal for Weasley, this time without Harry, as he steals it from Wetzel and powers the Quaffle through the hoop."

Then Dan Wetzel, burning with.....well no one was sure what he was thinking until afterward, he flew straight toward Harry, and the older boy was not really paying too close of attention to him. Wetzel was about five feet away when Harry noticed what was going on, and he turned just in time for the boy's punch to only lightly connect on the side of his head. Harry was dazed a little by it, as Wetzel flew toward Abbott in the Cortez goal, she still hadn't had a regular goal scored on her. Harry took a second to realize what had happened, and when he did, he took off after the Jefferson Chaser. Though not for long, as the crowd was going crazy, Cortez students were screaming bloody murder at the Jefferson players, while Proctor and Shawnee were only slightly less outraged. The Jefferson section was filled with students with their heads in their hands, dreading the payback they knew they were getting. Except for Jonas and Drew, not only were they exempt from the revenge, but they were as angry as anyone. Murray reluctantly got out of her seat and started down to the field.

Our noble referee, Shawn Respert, had been watching this unfold with a sense of 'hell no, he's not doing what I think he's doing'. Well he was, and he did, and Respert's whistle screamed as loud as he could make it. He used Sonorus to make his ruling.

"Flagrant Foul on Jefferson, for an unwarranted physical assault! He is ejected from the game! Potter, do not pursue him!!" Harry was about 10 feet away from his attacker, and rapidly gaming out revenge scenarios in his head. He stopped though, he would do nothing to jeopardize his team's certain victory. Respert continued.

"I want both Captains down on the field now!" Geyser, after making sure that Harry was more startled than anything, flew down to the field, where a still injured Chad gingerly flew along the ground to meet him.

“What the hell was that Norman?! Are you that stupid that you would send some punk kid to take on the most powerful kid in school? And have him fail while doing it!” Chad knew that a line had been crossed here, punching was frowned upon at any level of competition. And he also knew, Jonas and Drew notwithstanding, that he did not want Harry targeting his House in any way. A bit too late for that, if one wants an honest opinion, but Chad did what damage control that he could.

“I had nothing to do with that John and you know it. I don’t know what he was doing, and I don’t care. He’s off the team as far as I’m concerned.” Geyser really couldn’t say much to that, so he turned to Respert.

“I agree with your ejection of that moron, and I move that Jefferson be made to play shorthanded the rest of the game, however short it may last.” Chad wasn’t that conciliatory.

“Hell no sir, that is not allowed within the rules. We’ll already be down another level in quality with Dan gone, and the game is over as soon as the Snitch makes a long enough appearance anyway.” Respert happened to agree, and was privately hoping that the game would be over soon, whomever happened to win.

“There will be no short-handed play, Potter will get a penalty shot and then Jefferson can bring on another Chaser. I am warning both teams now, don’t touch the other team’s players, or I’ll start calling penalty shots every time someone is barely brushed. And no retaliation Cortez, at least not here on the field. Am I understood? Mr. Geyser? Mr. Chad?” Both Seniors nodded in understanding, and Respert flew back up.

“John, don’t let Potter do anything rash.” The plea was not hostile, but John looked at his rival disgustedly.

“You guys are ones to talk.” Geyser flew up to Harry in any case, but before he could say anything.

“I’m not going there John, let’s just get the win and get out of here.”

“Good enough, we’ll figure out something later.” And they would, Geyser was about to become an associate Marauder. Harry flew off to take his penalty shot, and drilled it. The score was now 340-40, and the Brits were burning with the desire to really run the score up. But it was not to be. Two minutes after Harry’s next goal, Lyman had the call.

“And Jenkins has the Quaffle, she’s being shadowed by both Weasleys, but they’re not fouling yet.....she shoots.....it’s blocked by Potter, who flew up from behind, he takes the Quaffle and.....there’s the Snitch, right below Forrester.....Brennan is on the other side of the field, but Aylesworth swoops up and grabs it! Reiko Aylesworth has grabbed the Snitch! Cortez wins the game! The final score is 500-40 for Cortez House. Harry Potter had 21 goals for Cortez, with the Weasley twins splitting up the other 14.” Fred flew up to Lyman, and shouted something at him.

“Okay, scratch that last one. Fred Weasley had five goals and George Weasley had nine, I guess they would know. Sally Jenkins had all four goals for Jefferson, all of them on penalty shots. The Weasleys led in penalties as well, with nine of them combined, to two for Jefferson, including a disqualification. Thank you everyone for coming out this morning. Lunch is served as soon as we can walk back to school, followed by Shawnee/Proctor at 2:00 pm sharp. I’m Josh Lyman, and I’ve been your announcer this morning. Sayonara, that means adios.” Lyman was a Happy Days fan apparently.

The Cortez players flew over to their cheering section and basked in the congratulations of their supporters, while raising their hands in victory. It was a triumph for them all really:

Jane Abbott had stopped five of nine penalty shots, while also blocking the two legitimate shots on goal that Jenkins got. The next week, she got a letter of congratulations from the General Manager of the New York Dragons.....over five years before she would be eligible for the Quidditch Draft of 2002.

Warrick and John took out the Jefferson Seeker with two incredibly well placed Bludger shots, and Geyser's increasing leadership skills had been duly noticed by the American and Australasian Quidditch scouts in attendance.

Harry, Fred, and George not only ran up the score mercilessly, but totally flummoxed the Chaser who had run wild in school games for three years plus now. More than one Great Lakes alum watching was calculating the cost/benefit of perhaps recruiting more European students, assuming they could get Murray to endorse the idea.

The Cortez team almost declined to shake hands with the Jefferson players down on the field, but a quiet word from Harry got them lined up.

"This is not the time folks, we have to still be the good guys here. Soon."

So the traditional handshakes ensued, though Dan Wetzel was being marched back to school by Riley Poole, who was being a little Filch-like in his evil chatter about the punishment that awaited him. That Poole was Harry-loyal only added to his creativity, and Wetzel was soon doing a little shaking of his own, and not of the hand variety.

Murray met the Cortez players as they ended their handshaking, and took Harry and Geyser aside. The Headmistress got right to the point.

"I will handle this Harry, don't do anything to him that is remotely violent or heinous." Harry wasn't willing to commit to anything just yet.

"What will be his punishment?"

"Well I understand that Norman has already kicked him off the team, I'll make that last another year before he can try out again, and he'll get a couple of detentions. Any further punishment meted out, can only be of the embarrassing variety, and not go too far or for very long. If you get my meaning." He did.

“Of course ma’am, and I wouldn’t dream of disobeying you. That said, after he fesses up to why on earth he did that, could you please let me know what he was thinking?”

“You got it. Now enjoy your victory, that was one of the best played Quidditch games I’ve seen in a long time by a particular side..”

“Thank you ma’am, I appreciate you saying that.”

“It’s all true. John, there are some scouts who would like a word with you, I’ve arranged for you to take a section of the library, it’s not going to be very crowded with the second game coming up.”

“Yes ma’am.” She left the area, and the rest of the team came up to their leaders. Warrick opened with the obvious.

“Well?”

“She told us to lay off him for the time being, and then only prank him.”

“She gave you permission to prank him?!” That was Abbott, who was not in the know about the ‘arrangement’ that Harry had with his Headmistress. But from being around the guys long enough, she had picked up certain hints.

“Not in so many words Jane. I’m open to making this a team project, if anyone wants out, now is the time to declare.” He looked at the others, not without a smile on his face either. No one seemed interested in being dealt out, and Harry’s smile grew.

“Terrific. Now we’re going to let the little jerk sweat for a week, then next weekend, we nail him. Now anytime anyone sees him in the halls or at meals, draw your finger across your throat, I want the bastard to get a slight sense of panic.”

“And then we nail him?”

“Well Warrick, we should think about that for a few days, and see how the psych out campaign goes, we might not need to do anything to him. Just the specter of revenge might send the better message.” Everyone had a thoughtful smile on their faces at hearing that, it would play very well if done right. Geyser just patted his smaller teammate on the back.

“Enough scheming there, time for lunch, and then the second game. I doubt Shawnee will be much of a problem, but we should scout them anyway. Let’s get back to school.” They left the field, only to be hoisted on the shoulders of their Housemates, and carried back to school. Even the reserves got this honor, it was a nice moment.

At lunch, all the talk seemed to be about the punch, though it had barely left a mark on Harry’s cheek. Molly, shockingly enough, wasn’t in a tizzy about it. She thought what every other adult thought: It was nothing but a hyped-up kid who lost his head in the heat of the moment, and Murray confirmed as much right before they left for the second game. The kid was contrite and apologetic, and would report to Harry the next day to say he was sorry.. Harry was asked by pretty much everyone he came in contact with as to what his revenge plans were, but he just placidly smiled at them and said that Murray would be the one to mete out any punishment. No one believed him, but that wasn’t really his problem. Besides, they were right, a message had to be sent, if only forestall any foolishness in any future games.

The second game was something of a dull nail-biter, as Proctor Seeker Ray Elwood fought off his Shawnee counterpart, literally, to grab the Snitch. It reminded Harry and company greatly of the Harry/Draco Seeker duels, not quite enough violence to justify any fouls though. Respert had told both teams that any more punches thrown, and he would toss the offender, and their Keeper as well. With no substitutions. That got their collective attention right away, but the game was pretty passive as a result, with only the Seekers making serious contact. The final score was 210-40, and Shawnee fans were not looking forward to the Cortez onslaught coming in six weeks time, on June 14. Cortez was now in first place in the standings, with Jefferson hanging on for second place, followed by Proctor and then Shawnee. The Quidditch Cup was all but clinched,

and it would basically take a forfeit for Cortez to lose it. Harry and the twins had only actually finished one season as Quidditch champions, and they already knew that they would take special pride in this one.

As the post-dinner party in Cortez was winding down, Molly and Arthur asked Harry to go for a walk with them. He looked around for the twins, thinking there was some Weasley family business going on here, but Molly stopped him.

“No Harry dear, just the three of us for now. Bill and the twins will join us a bit later.”

“All right, let’s go visit my plants on the roof, we can talk there.” He went and got a coat, and Molly and Arthur got theirs on the way up to the roof, which thankfully was just cold enough not to be ‘occupied’ by any couples at the moment. Harry explained the plants for a couple of minutes to them. The one for his eyesight was already paying dividends, he had obtained special permission from Murray the week before to go into Milwaukee to get his prescription changed. He now barely needed his glasses, and a few more months of the treatment might get rid of them altogether. The memory plant had helped as well, though there had only been a few tests to prove it on. He promised them both some samples before they took off the next afternoon.

“So what’s up?”

“Are you happy here Harry?” Harry had been wondering how it took her over a day to ask that.

“Yes I am Molly, this has been the best 8 months that I’ve ever had, truly.”

“And you’re definitely not going back to Hogwarts next year?”

“No I am most certainly not, whether Dumbledore is there or not. I’m graduating here in less than 14 months, and I’ll have made a decision about my future by then.”

“So you might come back to Britain after graduation?”

“I’m thinking on it, but I’m not willing to make any decisions on it right now.”

“Why not?” If anyone but Molly had asked that question.....

“Because events might change my mind Molly. Tell me what this is all about please.” Said very gently.

“Ginny and Ron both wrote to us about your Godric’s Hollow plan.”

“And Minister Scrimgeour told me about your tutoring request.” Double barreled weren’t they?

“True on both counts. I’m assuming that you have opinions on them? And before you ask, yes, I am interested in hearing them, I always value what you two have to say.” Molly was brought up a little short by that, thinking she would have to argue about it. So Arthur led off:

“What are you hoping to get out of those tutorials?”

“Practice, and tips on how to get better at fighting.”

“You don’t get enough practice here? With the vaunted Great Lakes Basic Combat program?” A bit of a dig, but not unexpected.

“It is vaunted Arthur, and justifiably so. Ripley is light-years beyond anyone I’ve had teach me at Hogwarts, Remus included. No, I mean practice in terms of partners I can let loose on. Right now I have Drew, Sophie, and the twins who I’m working with, and I’m hesitant with all four, not wanting to hurt them.”

“So you need people you can hurt, is that it?” He looked insulted at that.

“No, I need people I’m not too afraid to hurt. Quite the difference.”

“True, and you’re willing to give The Minister what he wants in exchange?”

“Yes I am, and I would think that you would be pleased with that, given how close of allies you two have become.” Arthur had made no effort to hide this from anyone, he was Rufus Scrimgeour’s left hand man, probably behind only Travis and Bones when it came to influence, though relatively far behind both.

“Yes we have Harry, and I would be less than honest if I didn’t admit that I’m very happy with how things have gone since Fudge was displaced. The Minister told you about Fudge’s end?”

“I know he’s in Australia living the quiet life, yes.”

“Will you seek out vengeance for what he did to you?” That gave Harry a start.

“Fudge?”

“Yes.” Harry’s answer surprised Arthur more than Molly, who still couldn’t help but see Harry as the shy little boy from Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, even after all these years.

“What the hell would be the point in that? It’s not like he can remember anything he did to me. Revenge only really works if the one being revenged upon gets the idea, and Fudge wouldn’t. Besides, he was quite useful to me at the end, and that can’t be discounted.”

“I didn’t think you would Harry, I just wanted to make sure.”

“Well that’s still a hair insulting, even from you, but I’ll let that pass for now. May I ask if Dumbledore gave you any directives for this little chat?”

“You may, and he did not. He just wanted to make sure you’re doing well and keeping up with your studies. He wanted to give me a written message for you, but I refused.”

“As did I Harry, he asked me to as well. I don’t know about Bill, he is less involved in the Order than he used to be. I imagine you know as much as we do about that.” Harry and Bill were in somewhat regular contact, part of the push and pull of Harry and Britain: He loved the distance that America provided him from his past troubles.....but he never lost his caring for his friends behind.

“Bill finds Dumbledore a bit too much to bear, or so he writes me.”

“Yes, because of you.” Well that was enough for Harry.

“Need I remind you Arthur, that Bill is a grown man and can decide his feelings for himself, without input from me.”

“I do not need reminding of that Harry, thank you.” Harry was now getting into this, and decided to have a little fun, since it was just the three of them.

“So is now the time to threaten me about Ginny? Or shall we beat around the bush a little more.” Molly flushed a little, and her husband smiled.

“No, why wait? I am going to ask something I’ve long been afraid to Harry, but the time has come: Do you have romantic feelings for my daughter?” Molly said nothing, but her eyes said quite a bit: A mix of hope and fear.

“No.” That was it, and said immediately.

“No?”

“And you’d better not bloody ask if I’m sure about that.” Arthur ignored that, though he was not surprised at the ‘no’ response.

“Is is that you have no feelings, or that you won’t risk the rest of us getting angry at you if things don’t work out.”

“Yes.”

“Yes to which?”

“Yes.” As in Harry was not going there, and they finally understood that.

“All right, all right. What did Ginny say to your commune proposal? I know what she wrote us, but I would like to compare if you don’t mind” Harry smiled at the commune part, he had always thought of that part as just a month long sleepover.

“She wrote that she was interested, and would ask you two for permission, and was Dean welcome. Everything is above board here.” Molly nodded as if that’s what Ginny had written them as well.

“Who would be there? You and your American friends, and who else?”

“Well Fred and George, and Lee, and Dobby and Winky of course, they’ll be supervising everything. Neville and Luna are in, pending certain family approvals, just like Ginny.” That they had gotten those approvals was a detail that Harry chose to leave out for the moment.

“And Ron, Hermione?”

“Still thinking about it, or so they wrote. I’m sure they’re waiting to see what the other three wind up doing.”

“Do you really want them there? Ron thinks you were just inviting them for form.” Well, well, Ron had something going on up in his noggin after all didn’t he?

“He’s right.” Molly and Arthur both were preparing their next comments, not thinking that Harry would say that.

“Excuse me?”

“I said that he’s right Molly. I only invited Ron and Hermione because it would have looked awkward if I hadn’t.” Molly didn’t know what to say again.

“It’s gone that far then?”

“Frankly, it has. I gave Ron another chance after Christmas, at your direct request Arthur, and all I’ve gotten is a series of three sentence letters from Hermione, and one letter period from Ron. Suffice is to say that my own letters were a little more verbose, and I even supplied the delivery person, who does not like going into that castle I don’t mind telling you. Hermione seems to blame me for the spinning, or maybe she blames the twins too but has no means to take it out on them.” She did, though she was far more afraid of Fred and George than she was of Harry. Hermione knew not so deep down that Harry would never hurt her, because of their past together, but she had no such bond with the twins. In her heart of hearts, and she had not even told Ron this, Hermione laid some of the blame for Harry’s new unforgiving tone onto Fred and George.

“She was not pleased with your methods, no.”

“Then don’t ask the question Arthur. My forbearance has limits, and Ron and Hermione both have reached them, never mind that we spun Ron because he attacked his own brother, something you people never seem to acknowledge for some odd reason. But leaving all that aside, I feel that Ron would be in danger if he stayed in a house with my friends.” More defense of the twins, which this time gave Molly some pause, as Arthur responded.

“Why is that?”

“Because Warrick and Jonas didn’t really take to him and his attitude when they met him at The Burrow, and after hearing me bitch about him for nine months, they probably wouldn’t need much

provocation to separate his teeth from his mouth.” They thought on that for a moment.

“And what would you do?” Harry refused to answer that question, for obvious reasons. Molly and Arthur loved him, he was sure of that, but it was not the same level of love that they had for Ron. He chose to make his point another way.

“This July thing is all about training and such for me, and a chance to experience where my father and his family grew up, and I would like my friends to share it with me. I am not going to use it as a reconciliation attempt with two people who can’t get it out of their heads that not everything in life is about them!” Harry’s voice rose to a crescendo, and Molly visibly flinched. Arthur did not, but was unpleasantly reminded that he was more or less alone on a rooftop with one of the most powerful Wizards on earth.

“I don’t know what to say here Harry, I really don’t.” Harry then said something he had long wanted to as well.

“I am not trying to split your family apart Arthur, Ron is the only one digging his heels in here, though of course he doesn’t see it that way. Your other sons were with me from the start of this whole enterprise, and did not hesitate for a second, including Charlie, who I barely knew.” That left out Percy, who was technically estranged from them at the time of Harry’s exodus.

“And Ginny, you didn’t tell her.”

“She was too close to Ron and Hermione, and they were too close to Dumbledore. As were you and Molly here. I had a choice sure, but the choice was between winning and losing. Or maybe between living and dying, because if Dumbledore had tried to stop me, I would not have gone quietly.”

“You’re not ready to face him yet Harry, and you know that.” Harry chuckled a bit.

“I’m sure you all would have said the same thing about myself and Snivellus before I took him down so easily.” Arthur had been afraid he would be thinking that, and tried to head Harry off.

“Snape is not Dumbledore, and you used a bit of trickery to take out Snape.”

“ Whatever works as far as I’m concerned. Dumbledore’s overconfidence would be his weakness in battle.”

“And yours is your certainty that your plans will work no matter what.”

“Yet since I’ve taken control of my affairs, they have. Abetted by your twin sons of course, and your eldest for that matter. Better to be dead or on the run than to be Dumbledore’s slave boy, his symbol and sacrifice.” Not a slave boy in any kind of perverted way, and they knew as much.

“Yes, I can understand that. Molly?”

“You’ve grown so hard, I just wish that none of this had ever happened.”

“You and me both Molly, and I’m not hard all the time, only when threatened.”

“And you’re threatened far too often for my tastes Harry dear. Ginny can come to Godric’s Hollow if she wants to, I won’t object. Fred and George will be there to look out for her, as will you.”

“Thank you Molly, I love Ginny like a sister, I would never let anything happen to her.”

“Don’t let it come to that Harry, she’s already had one brother sacrifice himself to save her. I don’t know if she could bear another one on her conscience.”

“That house will be filled with the four best Basic Combat students in our year from Great Lakes, not to mention two maniac twin redheads. Even if the house weren’t under Fidelius, I wouldn’t be worried.”

“You, Sophie, Drew.....and?”

“Reiko, she’s the overall number one in our class, just ahead of Drew and Sophie. I’m trailing along behind in sixth, though I have hopes of moving up one by the end of term. I still have the Olympics to make up some ground.”

“We should have something like that at Hogwarts, a way to compare the students.”

“This is the 76th year of them, Hogwarts has had plenty of time to get on board, but they haven’t. It’s too bad really, I barely got to know Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot, let alone see how my skills matched up with them.”

“And how do you think they would?”

“In a regular duel? I’d win I’m sure, if only because of speed and decisiveness. I wouldn’t beat either of them on a Transfiguration test, and that’s part of the Olympics as well. You should come by for them if you get a chance, I’m told they’re a sight to see. I can’t wait to see for myself.” Both Weasley parents were quiet for a moment, as if trying to find another safe topic to talk about. Harry felt differently though.

“Say what you feel you need to, both of you. We might not get a chance to talk like this again.”

“What do you mean, we have a long time Harry dear. This summer included.”

“We’re at war Molly, and things happen. I’ve lost two parents and a godfather, you lost a son. Things happen.”

“I have one question, if you don’t mind.”

“Shoot Arthur.”

“Why did you give in so easily to the Draco Malfoy deal? Did you figure out a loophole?”

“To the second part, not yet. To the first part: Money.” Arthur’s eyebrows went way up.

“He bribed you?”

“Not really, but sales from Hogwarts for WWW products have gone up considerably since I made lifting the ban part of the deal. All for the good of the shop.” Actually it was Charlie who needed his parents most about the success of the shop, there was a reference to it in almost every letter he sent from Romania.

“What else did you demand from him? I know that can’t have been all.”

“That is between The Minister and myself, and the twins.” Which in itself revealed a bit, but for all of Molly and Arthur’s private speculation, they had not come that close to the truth: the granting of Avada Kedavra privileges.

“Do you do anything that doesn’t include those two?”

“Not if I can help it. They’re my best friends, my brothers. I can trust them in a way I never could with Ron, since they don’t care if I’m rich or famous. There was always that little undercurrent with Ron.”

“You share a lot more of your wealth with the twins, you pay their school fees, subsidize the shop.” Harry was now getting exasperated with the both of them.

“Oh please Molly, I offered the same school deal to six other people, the twins were the only ones to take me up on it.” Molly was doing the math in her head, there were only five other DOM veterans.

“Who was the sixth?”

“Dean, I did it to keep him somewhat quiet. What do you guys think of Dean by the way?”

“Seems like a fine young man, and he makes Ginny very happy.”

“Yet you were up here asking if I had feelings for her.”

“Well that too has always been an undercurrent Harry, and you know it. I just wanted to make sure.”

“Fair enough Arthur, fair enough. For the record: I am not after your daughter romantically or sexually. I am not going to harm your youngest son, unless he throws down on me first, then Merlin help him. Your twins are my business partners and best friends, and hopefully always will be. And finally, your eldest sons are my friends, and I look forward to getting to know them better once I’ve left school and can travel as much as I like. Thus ends my official statement. Any more questions?” He started walking toward the door, feeling that his patience had been tried enough for one day. He was stopped by Arthur’s last question, as the elder two started to follow him.

“If you had to face Voldemort right now, could you take him?” He turned to them both:

“Probably not, but every day reduces that probably a little more. The day will come when we face each other, and I’ll win.”

“Are you sure about that Harry?”

“Do I have another choice?”

End Chapter

Author's Note: I made a couple of continuity errors in the last chapter, whereby I had people exiting the trunk into Harry's room, when in the first scene I had the trunk moved from Harry's room to the twins' new room. Whoops, sorry about that. Another screw-up put the twins in Muggle Studies at two different class times, even though Regular classes are only once a week. I swear I'm not screwing this stuff up on purpose, though it does seem like it. Sports fans out there will notice that I named the Jefferson Quidditch players after well known sportswriters, I want to emphasize that I'm a fan of all these writers, hence their inclusion in the story, no matter what I do to and with their characters. Speaking of which, what I have our players do to Dan Wetzel, he of the Quidditch punch, is ripped right from a Foxtrot comic strip, I'm a big fan. It was alluded to in the last chapter, and is a lot of fun, there's also a Boondock's reference slipped in as well. One last item: if you didn't like the dueling tournament in Straw, the bulk of this chapter is not going to be to your tastes. The good news is, I've concentrated the Olympic part in one block, and relatively few outside plot points are dealt with inside it. So continue on with this chapter with that foreknowledge.

Sunday, May 4, 1997

Athletic Field

2:00 pm

The morning Quodpot game had been a Proctor victory over Shawnee, virtually assuring them of being the only House with a double victory this weekend. Jonas sat in the Cortez section during the game and did his level best to explain the game to the newcomers. Surprisingly, Molly picked it up more quickly than Arthur, Bill, or Lee.....who was in fact sitting in the Shawnee section with Claudia, and getting a lot of stares whilst doing so. Outside of sitting with Harry after something large had gone down, Claudia had never gotten this much scrutiny from her Housemates, and it was both flattering and insulting. Of course this was not a good sports weekend for her House though, and they likely needed something to distract them. The final score was 14-6, and nothing of note had occurred during it, or at least nothing worth telling. The Weasleys got caught up in the excitement of the game, and some of the tension from the

previous night dissolved, as Harry walked back between the parents and bantered lightly with them. They were scheduled to leave after the second game, wanting to see Jonas in action. They made plans for the Weasley parents to come back for graduation, with Lee, Bill, and hopefully Fleur this time to join them.

At lunch, the gang's table was approached by a very fearful young man: the former Reserve Chaser for Jefferson: Dan Wetzel.

“Harry, can I talk to you for a second?” Harry got his first good look at the kid, who had skipped dinner the night before. He decided that the psychological punishment should start now.

“ You have 10 seconds.....beginning.....now.” He pointedly looked at his watch.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know why I did that yesterday, please believe that. Can we just let bygones be bygones.” Said hurriedly, that took seven seconds. Harry looked at him with a fake smile.

“Apology accepted, but you still need to be punished. And I don’t just mean being kicked off the team and a couple of detentions.” Harry stood up, it wasn’t like everyone in the room wasn’t looking right at them anyway. He addressed the entire room, raising his voice loud enough without use of his wand.

“ Dan Wetzel committed an unprovoked assault against me yesterday, and he needs to be chastised. That will only come from me, any student who lays a finger on him besides me, will answer to me. Dan, at some point in the next 24 hours, you will get your just desserts. I’ll give you a 10 second head start to get out of here. Starting.....now.” Wetzel had some speed for a kid as tall as he was, an inch over Harry, and he used it to sprint out of the room, leaving his half eaten lunch behind to the roars of laughter of all the students in the room. Before Molly could say anything to him, Harry walked over to the table that housed Murray, Heyman, and Josh Lyman, among others.

“Do I want to know what you have planned Harry?”

“I have nothing planned Professor Murray. If this goes how I want it, I won’t be anywhere near him during the next 24 hours.” Heyman looked confused.

“I thought you told the others to lay off him?”

“I did.” Lyman was the first to get it.

“You sneaky little bastard.”

“Both my parents were married Josh.....err, Professor Lyman.” Lyman was now openly laughing, even Ziegler sitting beside him had a wide smile on his face.

“You just wanted to make the brat pee in his pants, didn’t you?” Harry didn’t deny this.

“I believe my message will be sent, yes. If I thought he was any threat to harm me in the future, I would introduce him to Dr. Carter. But he’ll have learned his lesson, by lunchtime tomorrow anyway.” Murray just shook her head in amusement, as the other faculty didn’t even try to hide their smiles.

“Fair enough, I’m sure he’s halfway to Marquette by now.”

“He needs the exercise. Have a good day Professors.” He walked back to his table.

“Harry dear, you aren’t going to do anything to that boy are you?” Harry decided to have a little fun, after last night Molly needed some pause.

“I don’t know, I might have to turn him inside out. My new best friend Jarvis Caton-Stanford will be of tremendous help there. He did write the book.” Sophie nearly spit out the tater tot that was in her mouth, that was the book Harry had been reading after he found out about Snape’s death.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Sure I would, I’m The Boy Who Killed.” That had only been a theory, The Daily Prophet had technically never used that term in reference to Harry. Publisher Augustus McCrae was bold, but not suicidal. Harry still only read the paper when he absolutely had to, and even then borrowed the twins copy, not wanting McCrae to gain so much as a Knut from him.

“Harry, I wish you wouldn’t joke about things like that.”

“That’s the only way to deal successfully with things like that Molly dear, laugh them off.” Molly looked at her sons, but was smiling as she did so.

“No need to wonder where you get your sense of humor from Harry, and I’m glad.” She did sound glad, and everyone at the table could readily see that. Ron would not want to be a fly on the wall of this conversation, that’s for sure. Détente had set in, and plans were already being made for a large family dinner for Harry’s birthday, at the soon to be up and running Godric’s Hollow.

“Me too, this has been a great year.” Bill cleared his throat.

“I suppose that I should continue the ‘great year’ theme.” Molly sucked in her breath, this could only mean one thing. Bill beat her to the punch, as it were.

“Yes Mum, Fleur and I are engaged.” Molly squealed with delight, and the rest of the table let out a cheer too.....even Drew, who had never met Fleur, though Jonas had given him a very detailed description.

“That’s so wonderful Bill, have you set a date?”

“Sometime in July, we’re not sure. That’s when Gringotts can spare us both, or so my supervising goblin told me. Fleur wanted to be here

with me to tell you, but her sister is having a baby sometime in the next week, and she wanted to be there with her.” This was her older sister Laure, not the younger Gabrielle, whom Harry had ‘saved’ from the Mer-people.

“That’s cool big brother, the first of us to get married.”

“Well, Fred?” He got a nod at his 50/50 guess.

“ Right, I knew I’d get lucky.....no Harry, you can’t have my firstborn, I’ll figure out a way to con the secret out of you someday. Anyway guys, Fleur has three sisters and a really close cousin, so adding Ginny to her side of the aisle, and I’ll need all three of you as groomsmen. Charlie will be best man, and Ron will join you three.” No derision there for Ron, he was family after all. Harry didn’t point out that Ron didn’t think of him as family, he would let Bill fight that out with his little brother on his own.

The next down the aisle would likely be the twins, as Charlie had recently broken up with a girlfriend and was currently single. The Dragon Preserve in Romania was not exactly flowing with women, and Charlie had written all of them recently that he had decided to extend his stay there until at least the end of 1998, with a nice raise and a small promotion. The twins were now bracing themselves for ‘well boys?’, but to their relief it didn’t come. In truth though, they had been with Alicia and Angelina far longer than Bill had been with Fleur, and this did get them to thinking a little bit.

Before too much longer, everyone was trekking out to the next game. Ripley had drawn the announcing assignment, and before introducing the teams:

“I would like to ask for a moment of silence, to honor our fallen comrades Arthur Hailey and Ryan Chappelle. Students, Quodpot players, outstanding young men, they were all of these things and much more. Above all they were heroes.” The minute of silence seemed to last quite a while, as no one breached it.

During the game that followed, Sally Jenkins proved that she could play Quodpot almost as well as she could play Quidditch. She took Hailey's position at Left Forward, and immediately established an athletic rapport with Jonas and Jim Bouton. Their passing was crisp and fruitful, as the trio scored 10 goals in the first 20 minutes over the hapless squad from Cortez. Ed Lattimore managed to score two goals of his own before the Quod exploded in his face. As he was far and away the best Cortez player, this was not a positive turn of events. The Cortez squad was in big trouble next year without him, and Harry had already had to reject multiple entreaties from people trying to get him to go out for the team. There would be more to come, as they would for Warrick and Reiko as well.

The score only got more lopsided over the next 40 minutes, as Jenkins and Quidditch Keeper Bill Simmons both got some much needed game experience. Simmons was graduating, and his performance against the Brits notwithstanding, was considered by most to be a late draft pick in the upcoming American Quidditch draft, which was only two rounds for four teams, so it was a big thing to get drafted. Jenkins, however, still had two years to go, and would have an interesting decision to make. She genuinely preferred Quidditch to Quodpot, and was a certain first round pick in either the American or Australasian drafts, but Quodpot meant more money if she played domestically. It would be a fascinating choice, and Jonas had told the gang over a month earlier that he would be doing a hardcore recruitment of her to play Quodpot fulltime the next season.

Not that kind of hardcore, though Jenkins was not unattractive. This might bear watching.

The final score was 32-4, and believe it or not, it was not that close. Team Captain Jim Bouton, at the 50 minute mark, ordered that the offense not attempt to score any longer. This 10 minute game of keep away allowed the last Cortez goal, and had four Jefferson players sent off with faces full of the Quod. Jefferson was still undefeated, with Shawnee coming up next, and the losses of Chappelle and Hailey had not been noticed on the field this day. Jonas scored five goals and assisted on 14 others, with Jim Bouton leading his House with 12 goals, along with 10 assists. Sally Jenkins scored 10 goals in

her debut, with Bill Simmons contributing three goals of his own, as well as playing superb defense.

It was now evening back in Britain, so Molly and her posse said their goodbyes on the way back. She walked with Harry as they approached the school.

“Harry dear, would you like me to have a word with Ron about July?” Sophie had suggested to Harry that he ask Molly to do just that, and he wavered then and was still doing so.

“I don’t know Molly, I don’t want Ron, and by extension Hermione, to think that he HAS to do this. If he’s there, it should be because he wants to be, not because his mother is telling him to.” That hadn’t occurred to her, she didn’t really realize how much sway she had on Ron and Ginny in particular.

“Well if he asks for my advice, I shall tell him to take the opportunity. He could learn a lot by doing this, Hermione and Ginny too. His grades are much better this year, but you can never learn too much.”

“Thank you Hermione....I mean Molly.”

“Very funny Harry, I never grasped that I had triplets instead of twins.”

“Don’t even think about trying to change my hair color.” She started laughing heartily, and ahead, Arthur was pleased to hear them getting along so well. He had been a bit worried after the previous night’s conversation, and Harry’s running defense of Fred and George.

“I won’t Harry dear. Just promise me one thing.” Uh oh.

“What?”

“If you and Ron work together during this training month, don’t hurt him if you can help it. I know he will probably take out some anger issues upon you, but just defend yourself. Defense may be his best

subject, but he's not you and he knows it.....I fear that he might try to vent on you."

"I know he will, that's why I won't be training directly with him. Look Molly, I know what he's capable of, and I know what my American friends can do for the most part. If we do things as a group, he'll be with Warrick and Jonas, who both got E's on their Defense OWL and aren't really good fighters from what I can tell. Drew would take him apart, and the ladies are not big fans of his, and might not be so merciful." Jonas' national team training wasn't due to start until July 15, so he would have a couple of weeks in the commune.

"Harry....." He interrupted her.

"As long as he behaves, I'll look out for him. I promise." There was no mistaking the look of relief on her face.

"Thank you Harry."

Harry doubted that Ron could suck it up to take the offer anyway, so he felt that his promise didn't really mean much. The Brits were gone 10 minutes later, and the gang hunkered down for a lot of homework, this being the last week of classes before the Olympic break. Even Jonas tore himself away from the Jefferson party, one that Dan Wetzel was hiding from, to do some studying.

Flashback to earlier that day:

Hogwarts

Noon

Dumbledore's Office:

Dumbledore looked over at the assembled students, our favorite crew from the Department of Mysteries, minus it's ringleader of course. Dumbledore conjured chairs for all of them, and they reluctantly sat in them, none of them being comfortable in here.

“Kids, I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’ve brought you here. I want to discuss plans for the summer. You five, along with Draco Malfoy, are the highest priority targets for our Death Eater friends, and I want to make sure that you are safe.” They had all been afraid of this. Neville let the old man get no further in his spiel.

“I have my summer plans all worked out Headmaster, I’ll need no assistance. Thank you though, I appreciate your interest in my well being.” Somehow Luna kept her face straight during that.....well as straight as her expression could get. She chimed in next.

“That goes for me as well Professor Dumbledore. Thank you.” The others were silent, so Dumbledore felt free to question the couple.

“May I ask what you will be doing?” Neville and Luna had talked about this before, and both decided that they did not want to be caught in any lies later, and it would just be easier to tell Dumbledore most of the truth, rather than have him try to ferret it out later.

“We’re going to take a trip in August with Luna’s father, looking for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.” Even Dumbledore cracked a smile at that one, in spite of Luna’s father resisting his entreaties to start a true competitor to The Daily Prophet. The Quibbler was still a nice source of amusement for him, in an otherwise darkening world.

“And before that Neville?” Neville looked over at Ron and Hermione for a moment, and then plunged ahead.

“We will be spending July in Wales. At Harry’s house.” Silence hung in the air for a moment, as to Neville’s great satisfaction, he saw the old man flinch violently, though his facial expression did not change a whit.

Dumbledore had not reacted with a great deal of outrage when he had gotten Rufus’ missive about taking Fidelius off the Potter house. Indeed he had idly wondered what had taken Harry so long to get around to it. He did, however, feel that he should have been allowed to argue the matter with The Minister, if only to delay the inevitable

and send a reminder or three to Harry about how powerful Dumbledore was. Not only had he been rebuffed curtly by Diggory, the lesser man had produced a Ministry warrant for Dumbledore's arrest, for refusal to remove Fidelius upon request of the owner. Only the date needed to be filled in, Diggory said, and Biller was said to be chomping at the bit to arrest his former Headmaster. Rufus would not meet with Dumbledore on that or any subject, saying that he was busy. Dumbledore had been tempted to resign everything on the spot, if that's the kind of respect he was going to be given. However, Bones had taken him aside and vaguely explained to him that Rufus and Harry had reached a series of understandings, and that he would be better off not fighting it for the time being.

So the old man had done the job as ordered, with Diggory along just to make sure it was handled properly. He had not been back there since, and was not aware that Bill Weasley had put the house back under Fidelius, though only Rufus himself was. Of all the people left currently in Britain, Harry trusted Bill the most to keep the secret.....Neville and Luna being in Hogwarts under the old man's increasingly watchful eye.

"I see. And your grandmother is agreeable to this Neville? Your father Luna?"

"Yes sir."

"Yes he is Headmaster."

"Yet you cannot use magic during July Neville, and you not at all until November Luna." Harry had written them of The Minister's waiver of the underage rules, but Neville wanted no part of letting Dumbledore in on what they were really going to be doing. They assumed all non-Dobby handled letters were being read by at least McGonagall, if not the old man himself.

"That won't be a problem sir. Harry and his American friends are all legal, as are the other invited guests, most of them anyway."

“And who are the other invited guests, as you call them?” Neville just smiled politely.

“That’s not for me to say Headmaster, you should ask Harry, it’s his house and his guest list.” It took everything they all had inside not to laugh at the potential of that.

Dumbledore did not respond to the salvo, but pointedly looked at the other three. He picked out the next likely one to waver.

“Miss Weasley?”

“I will be there as well sir.” Ron and Hermione broke ranks and looked at her agog.

“Mum will never let you do it Ginny, and you know that.” Ginny quietly responded.

“I got a note from her this morning, she’s given her permission.” Indeed Molly had sent it over with Dobby, it was waiting on Ginny’s nightstand when she woke up. Ron was getting a little red in the face, as if she was making this all up to just bother him.

Not an unreasonable assumption mind you, and he went that route.

“I don’t believe you.”

“I couldn’t care less what you believe. I’m going, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” Hermione, not wanting a battle to touch off right here in the office, decided it was time to play peacemaker.

“Enough, both of you. Headmaster, Ron and I have received similar invitations, and we have not made up our minds as yet. I would imagine that Fred and George will be there as well, since they go where Harry goes.” Ginny gave her a dirty look at hearing that, though it was not untrue lately. Dumbledore was a little relieved that the rumors of infighting amongst the DOM were not exaggerated, he felt they would be much easier to deal with in smaller groups than as a united whole.

“Very well. I will not attempt to dissuade any of you from going there for a time, since that will likely sway you to want to stay over there for a year. I will simply ask that you take all possible precautions with your safety.” Neville had one more point to raise:

“Well I for one appreciate you saying that sir, but I want to make something plain right now: You are not to place any Tracking Charms on me at any point. I’ll be in Godric’s Hollow in July, and Scandinavia in August, before I return here for my final year. That’s all you need to know sir, and legally you don’t even need to know that much. A repeat of last summer is only going to cause problems, and I will not hesitate to let my cousin, The Minister, know all about them.” Dead silence in the room, as this was the first time Ron, Ginny, or Hermione had even heard about Neville’s relation to Rufus, though Dumbledore was fully aware of it and always had been. Neville was staring very directly right at Dumbledore, who held his gaze evenly.

“Your message is understood Neville.”

“I knew it would be sir.” Neville had never felt more self-satisfied, non-Luna category, than he did right at this moment. He couldn’t wait to tell Harry about it.

“Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, once you decided on your plans, I would appreciate you letting me know. You’re not asking permission of course, as you both are of age, but merely giving me a heads-up.”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes Professor Dumbledore.”

“Very well, you may return to your Sunday routines. I will see you Prefects at the meeting this afternoon.” The five of them got up and left, and Ron and Ginny were about to lay into each other until Luna of all people stopped them.

“Please children, if there are Listening Charms anywhere in the hallways, they are here. May I suggest the library?” They agreed, and

soon repaired to a spot in the corner, a spot that none of them typically used. Hermione checked for any bugs, and found none. She looked at Neville first.

“Your cousin The Minister?”

“Yes, his mother and my mum’s mum are sisters.”

“You never mentioned this before.” Not in six years of living with him had Ron ever remotely sniffed it, nor had Seamus, Dean, or Harry. It was simply something Neville never talked about, though Luna had known. Harry’s surprise back in February had been entirely genuine.

“You never asked.” She couldn’t deny that, and Hermione’s opinion of Neville, high to begin with, reached a new stratosphere.

“No we didn’t, and it’s rather impressive that you never said anything. Ginny, you’re set on going?”

“I am, I can’t believe they said yes. Harry must have talked Mum into it.”

“I’m sure he did.”

“Oh shove it Ron, nobody forces Mum into doing anything she doesn’t want to do, not Dad, not you or I, not Harry. Tell me I’m wrong, I dare you.” Ron wasn’t sure if she was or not, but he wasn’t about to give her any ammunition.

“Whatever. What about Dean? Did Harry deign to let him come too?”

“Dean can’t come, he and his Mum are traveling this summer. Her job is sending her on some fact finding trip.” Dean’s mother worked for Barclay’s Bank, in the risk management division, and was being sent on a tour to inspect some of their holdings. It was a big opportunity for her, and she was taking Dean along for what might be their last vacation together, before he reached adulthood. This had

just come up in the last week or so, so Ginny had not had a chance to tell Harry about the change in plans.

“Ah hah, I should have known.” Ginny looked at her brother condescendingly.

“Oh Ron, if only you had the minerals to say things like that to Harry’s face.” Luna started giggling, as Ginny’s taunt hit home.

“Oh be quiet Luna, she wasn’t talking to you, she was being filled with hot air to me, like she always is.”

“I could take you in a fight and you know it, even before my lessons this summer.”

“You wish little sister.”

“Enough!” Everyone looked at Neville.

“I’m sick of this shite, and sick of hearing the same old arguments. Ron, Hermione, I’m not going to try to talk you into accepting this incredible opportunity, but you would be fools not to take it. Whatever issues you have with Harry are so trivial in comparison to this it’s not even funny. If Dumbledore cared so much about you two and your safety, he would have arranged something like this himself, but he didn’t, did he?” Hermione couldn’t deny the logic of this, and didn’t try.

“No he didn’t. Look guys, give Ron and I a moment will you?” They nodded, and Ginny, Neville, and Luna moved off to talk amongst themselves.

“I don’t want to do this Hermione. I don’t want to go to that house and be mocked by The Boy Who Lived and his Yank friends.” Hermione had heard versions on this theme for some time now, and was reaching her limit.

“Ron…….”

“You want to go, don’t you?” She felt that now was the time to settle this.

“I want those lessons, yes. And yes Ron, I want to see Harry again. I miss him, and I’m interested to see how he’s changed. I have no feelings for him Ron, nothing romantic. You must understand this.” Ron’s rebuttal shocked her.

“Oh I know that much Hermione, give me a little credit please. This isn’t about you and him, not at all.” Huh? That had always been her assumption.

“Then why?”

“Because every time I’m around Harry now, I’m reminded of my limitations. That I’m not as smart as either of you, or as tough, or as powerful, or even as hard working. I can handle it with you because I love you, and I always have. With Harry, its just too much.” Hermione had no clue of what to say to that. She managed a delaying question first though;

“How long have you felt this way Ron?”

“It’s probably been there since The Tri-Wizard, but I really started feeling it after the OWL results. I didn’t want him to leave Hermione, if he had asked me I would have urged him not to. But in a way it’s kind of been a relief, not having to compete with him, a competition I know I’m going to fail most times.” Ron felt very relieved getting this off his chest, though it was something he had been hinting at for months, hoping that Hermione and Ginny would get the message without him having to say it.

“I’m glad you told me this Ron, it explains quite a lot.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t sooner Hermione, I just didn’t want you torn between us more than you already are.” Hermione made the split-second decision to put that topic to rest once and for all.

“I picked you Ron, you must know that. Neither of you made this a competition, neither of you forced me to choose, but all the same, you’re my choice.” He took her hand.

“I’m glad, and I believe you. Look, I’ll think about the Godric’s Hollow thing some more, and maybe I’ll do it, I don’t know. But you should tell him yes Hermione, I don’t want you to feel cheated later on. I’ll do my work in the shop, not pissing off the twin wankers hopefully, and we can see each other as much as we did last summer.”

“Let’s give it some more time then, and see how we both feel. We have almost two months, and I doubt Harry will revoke the invitations if we delay some more.”

“All right, if that’s what you want. But my earlier thing stands, go if you want to, and I won’t say a word against it.” There was one more thing on her mind about that.

“If you do go Ron, don’t try to take him on, don’t challenge him to anything.” Ron started laughing.

“No thanks, I’ll pass on trying to duel Harry. I’ve tried practicing that quick draw thing of his, and I just can’t do it. All those times of escaping his muggle cousin gave him those reflexes, I can’t compete with that.” Hermione had never felt more relief in her short life, and it showed. She waved the others back over.

“Ron and I are going to take some more time to think, but we won’t saying anything to try and get you three not to go.”

“Not like it would work anyway.”

“Thanks Ginny, we do appreciate that. May I ask what else your mum said in her note.”

“Just that Harry, Fred, and George stomped the living daylight out of the other team. And they all played together, as Chasers.” That raised some eyebrows, even Ron was interested.

“What was the score?”

“500-40 I think, and all of the other team’s goals were on penalty shots.” Ron was about to take another shot at Harry, assuming correctly that the twins had been protecting him, but decided against it, Hermione would only take so much of that kind of thing. The five of them soon went their separate ways, with Ron and Hermione sticking around in the library, Ginny going to see what Dean was up to, and Neville and Luna going off to the Ravenclaw Common Room so they could study. The Daily Prophet the next morning had the WWW partnership’s Quidditch domination on the front page. McCrae had no great love for Harry, but his grandkids were all WWW fanatics, and he liked to make them happy if he could. His story was validated by the number of positive letters to the editor that the paper received, over 80 percent of the response was pro-Harry/pro-WWW.

Monday, May 6, 1997

Great Lakes Dining Hall

Lunch

Noon had just clicked on the clock when an ashen-faced Dan Wetzel hesitantly came into get his first real meal in a day. The gang’s larger table was not near the door, so Harry did not immediately notice him come in.....until the hush in the room told him something was up. He looked over and saw the kid, and a large grin came over his face. Jonas and Drew had reported that Wetzel had not been seen in the Lounge that evening, and was said to be hiding somewhere in the basement where he thought he would be safe. Harry had not so much as bothered to look at the Map to find this out, but it was nice to hear. Wetzel had not showered or anything of the sort, and was wearing the same clothes as he had been during Harry’s initial threat.

“So have you learned your lesson?” Said very loudly.

“You didn’t get me, I lasted the day.” Said with a tiny bit of defiance, but not much. Harry just smirked at him.

“Look in the mirror kid, I got you.” Quiet snickering could be heard throughout the room.

It hit Dan right then, that Harry’s threat had just been a put on.

“Shit.”

“Now, now, don’t get another detention or anything. Go eat your meal and don’t ever punch anyone again unless they punch you first.” Wetzel just stood there feeling foolish for a minute, then joined his friends at their table, to their good natured jeers. Harry pointedly turned his back on him, and would have no further dealings with Wetzel for the rest of his time at Great Lakes. Jonas made a point of giving the kid threatening glares whenever he could in the Lounge, so Wetzel was always on his best behavior in public. Drew simply looked at him with contempt on his face, and would continue to do so until the end of Drew’s Great Lakes experience.

Sunday, May 11, 1997

Lunch

Great Lakes Dining Hall

Murray stood up to make her announcement, the room was abuzz as they assumed it was about The Olympics, and they were correct.

“Attention students. As you are all fully aware, tomorrow is the first day of The Olympics. The events will begin at 10:00 am sharp, and will continue until 3:00 pm, and it will be that way every day until Saturday, when the events will start at the same time, and end when they end. The Olympics will count 25 percent toward the Carver Cup Points, with class results counting for 50 percent, and Quidditch/Quodpot results counting for the remaining 25. The current standings are thus:”

Jefferson House: 1230 points

Cortez House: 1025 points

Shawnee House: 1020 points

Proctor House: 952 points

The athletic results would only be tabulated after the final games in mid-June, so in reality the score was a lot more lopsided than it appeared to be for first place. Cortez probably had the Quidditch Cup in the bag, but that would be counterbalanced by a last place finish in the Quodpot Cup. Jefferson seemed likely to win the overall in Quodpot, while being just as likely to finish a strong second in Quidditch. The standings above were based solely on the classroom results, which were not finished of course, and would not reflect OWL and NEWT results. So it was that Jefferson was fairly confident of overall Carver Cup victory, as they had been the year before. All Harry's arrival had done was shuffle the seats behind them.

The Olympics, for all intents and purposes, were a kind of practical OWL, but one that crossed all student boundaries, everyone from the weakest Novice to the strongest Senior. Every subject but two were represented by at least two events, and the wand subjects of Transfiguration, Defense, and Charms each had more. There was also a flying competition, and an obstacle course.....they had gotten the idea for that from old stories of past Tri-Wizard Tournaments, though there was nothing remotely life threatening about the course in this case. Only Divination and Wandless Magic were not represented with events. Wandless just had too few students taking the classes, a total of 19 this year, and all were exclusively Juniors and Seniors. Divination was just a subject that Murray could not take seriously, so in her first year as Headmistress she had asked that the subject be deemed 'optional' for the Olympics, and her request was granted. It had not appeared on the Olympic program since then.

There were three students per year per House entered into each event. That was 84 kids per full field event, 3 X 4 X 7, which seemed like a lot, but it was manageable. Each school did their Olympics during a separate week in May, so governmental types were on hand to help with logistics and judging. The event titles were consistent

through the years, though some of the details and tasks were different. For instance the obstacle course changed every year, as did the tasks for Potions, Charms, and Transfiguration, among others. The Flying Challenge remained the same though, and students could be seen practicing the maneuvers as soon as the snow thawed in Spring.

The scoring worked like this: The top student in each year in each event received 12 points, with the next nine students getting nine points on down to one. The top 10 students overall in each event received a like number of points. So the top student overall in each event scored 24 points for his/her House. The way the points worked is, the students were competing mainly against those in their year, not against the field as a whole. So the Novice winner would score far more points than most Seniors, though they were far behind in magical training and study. The overall score is what added the spice to the contest, and showed who were the 'best in show' for the entire school. In 1996, Jefferson Senior Michelle Ganoff was the overall Champion, scoring a perfect 96 points in winning all her events, something that happened once every four or five years on the average. Drew had stunned the school by finishing third, the best finish for a Transition year student in three decades, winning the Reducto Challenge and the Shield Builder. Needless to say, he won the Transition year competition. Of the rest of the gang, Reiko had finished 13th overall and second within Transition; Sophie 22nd overall and third within Transition; Claudia 45th and 13th within Transition; Jonas 66th overall and 14th in Transition, in spite of placing third in the flying competition; and Warrick placed 90th overall and 21st in Transition. These were all above average finishes for their year, Cortez finishing a decent third behind runaway winner Jefferson and Shawnee. Most students scored a point or two, if any, the lesser students not getting into as many events.

Each student was required to compete in one event at the minimum, and it was the responsibility of the Seniors to balance that out. A committee of Seniors in each House set the lineups for each event, and the maximum for each student was four. They canvassed all the students in their charge, and had access to current grades and past Olympic performances. Harry was entered into the flying competition,

the obstacle course, the Reducto Challenge, and the Dodge-a-thon. Lattimore had given him his assignments, with this message:

“You know Harry, 90 points would really be great if you could get them.” Harry smiled at him with more confidence than he felt.

“Ed mate, I’m shooting for the moon on this one. I want 96, and I’ll be disappointed if I get any less.” Harry was a bit nervous, since all of this was new to him. The others had had five years to witness and participate in these events. He saw all of them via pensieve of course, but there was no substitute for being there live and in person. He was confident in his ability to win The Reducto Challenge and the Dodge-a-thon, but the others were a bit iffy.

“That’s the spirit, I know we can count on you.”

“You can, this is our year Ed.” He actually had no clue as to the capabilities of the rest of his House, or even the rest of his year within the House. Harry knew what he could do, and what Sophie could do, and the twins. Even the rest of the gang was a bit of a mystery, outside of Reiko. He had just one class with Warrick and Claudia, and two with Jonas. He had heard enough rumors that the Senior Class as a whole did not have a star on the order of Michelle Ganoff, the departed champion now at The Sorbonne, or Drew, the heavy favorite to win this time.

“How hard was it to do the assignments?” Ed laughed bitterly.

“You know, for years I was always wondering at how the Seniors came up with some of those draws.....until now. I never realized the half of it dude, you just wait until you have to do it next year.”

“How long did it take?”

“It took five meetings, all three hours minimum. At least you were easy to slot, and a few others like Clancy and McMahon.” Jeff McMahon was the top Transition student in Cortez, and the school, academically. He was on the Quodpot team, though he would not be

doing the Flying Challenge. He and Harry knew each other vaguely, but he wasn't a WWW customer, so they had not really talked at all.

"I'm really looking forward to this, quite different than what I'm used to."

"Well I'm sure you won't be kidnapped this time, try to not be too disappointed about that." Harry smiled.

"I'll muddle through my sadness, somehow." The two shared a look of understanding, and would be better friends for it.

Monday, May 11, 1997

Great Lakes Inner Perimeter

10:00 am

The Flying Challenge was first up this day, at least for our players. Reiko, Warrick, Jonas, the twins, and Harry were here from the gang.....the first two almost by default. Reiko, Warrick, and Harry were the only athletes in Cortez in their year, so they got picked for the flying challenge. Indeed Gary Jenson, who lived in the other Junior Year room, not counting Clancy, had come up to Harry on the first day the students came back and thanked him for being there.....just so that Jenson didn't have to do this event anymore, after five long years of being the sacrificial lamb so that their year would have the necessary entrants. Gary had no interest in playing either Quodpot or Quidditch, didn't much care for flying in general, and had finished dead last in his class in four of the five years he had done the event. A welcome change for the Cortez side.

Drew was busy defending his title in the Shield Builder event, which was pretty much what it sounded like. Claudia was engaged in History Trivial Pursuit, which she had placed ninth in the year before, while Sophie had the day off and was watching her boyfriend and best friend fly. Harry had idly asked Ed the night before if he had been considered for either of the other gang events, but the older boy

just shook his head immediately. No, Harry's four best events were easy to divine.

The Flying Challenge was pretty simple in its conception. There was a ring, roughly half the size of a hula hoop, dangling from one of the Quidditch hoops. Flyers started from the side of the school, and they were timed on how quickly it took them to bring back the hoop, the round trip distance was within a couple of feet of being a mile. The first round eliminated the first 30 flyers, with the second and third rounds cleaving off 20 flyers each. The finals were the last 14, and only the times after Round One carried over. Each flyer used a standard Nike Air Trafficker model broom, the latest Nike offering in the series. Harry and the twins had been flying every night on the new brooms, supplied at a nice discount by the manufacturer, to acquaint themselves. The school paid for the brooms and used them for muggleborn and poorer students come the following year. The Brits' Firebolt and Nimbus models were different enough that they needed the practice, and their collective appeals to use their usual brooms had been denied immediately. The powers that be knew that all three Brits would be strong contenders, and wanted not even the appearance of cheating.

The contestants went in order of year, so the first round took two hours to complete. None of the gang was in danger of missing the top 54 though, even if Harry and the twins flew pretty hard, not knowing what the field in general was capable of. The top times were never posted on the magical scoreboard on the wall of the school, only the bottom five times.....the ones on the bubble, as it were. After the first round, everyone trooped in for lunch, more antsy than anything, as there would be another easy round before things got interesting. Claudia looked at the Brits:

“So how was it?”

“Bloody boring if you ask me, that round just took too much time for all the good it did.” That was Fred, who had conjured up a chaise lounge and had slept through most of the first round, as he had gone dead last, right after his brother and Lattimore. Harry had similar sentiments, though he was more diplomatic.

“The rest of it should go a lot more quickly, especially since the times carryover.” Harry, in fact, had had the fastest time of the first round, though again that didn’t mean much, since the older flyers did not put the hammer all the way down. Harry figured that he would go full tilt in the next round, and then skip round three to rest for the finals. He looked at Claudia.

“What about you, you still alive?”

“I am, though there were some nervous moments in the first game. The semi-finals are next, that’s where I got tripped up last time.” Her event was nothing more than a specialized version of the muggle game, and was the one event for which the three person per House per year limit was waived, since the Junior and Senior years didn’t take History. She had been burned by her ninth place finish the year before, and was determined to at least make top three this time.

“Drew?” The young man had a relaxed smile on his face, as well he should.

“I’m into the finals, the top time from the first round is grandfathered in, and I nailed it pretty well.” The Shield Builder was much like it seemed: The student conjured up a shield and had to hold it up as a pair of attackers tried to batter it down with mild to medium offensive spells. The shield bearer was restricted in his/her movements, and had to stay within a 10 foot square area. The older students had a distinct advantage in all the events, given that they had been taught more and more as the years went on, so they could use more advanced things, and this event was no different. There was a technique to it as well in this event, as certain spells could be kind of massaged aside, or deflected if done correctly, rather than have the shield take the full brunt of the spell or hex. Drew was a master at this, and he had lasted over 30 seconds longer than anyone else in the first round. As he talked about it, Harry was mentally cursing Lattimore and company for not putting him in this event, it sounded like a fun challenge. All for the good of the House though, and he reluctantly knew that he was needed in the Flying Challenge, where his year was weak.

After lunch, everyone trooped back to their events and got ready to get serious. The round went a lot quicker this time, as there were 30 fewer entrants, and the organizers had a much better handle on how to run things, the kinks and rust having been taken away. Our players easily made it through this round as well, for the most part, with Harry ceding the top spot to Jonas this time, with Jim Bouton third, and the twins placing fifth and seventh. Reiko and Warrick made the cut as well, though Reiko was 19th, and Warrick was only 30th, and both would have to improve to make into the final round, though both were still in the top 10 in their year, and would at least score some points if they didn't make the finals.

The penultimate round started at 2:00 pm, with 34 flyers still going. The format changed slightly, as they went in reverse order of standing. Warrick went fourth, and improved his time by over a second from his previous best in the first round. However, others improved as well, and by the time things got to Reiko, Warrick had only moved up three slots, and was eliminated from the competition, finishing overall in 27th place. Reiko, fueled by that perhaps, rocketed off to her best time of the day as well, which would hold up and allow her to just scrape into the finals at 14th place. Fred and George almost held serve, even though they didn't have to fly to make it to the finals, they just wanted the fun of doing it again. They were now seventh and ninth. Harry, Jonas, and Jim Bouton sat out the round and waited for the finals.

Claudia and Drew came out to cheer them on, five minutes apart. Drew had successfully defended his Shield title with relative ease, though he too wished Harry had been in it, just to see. Marauder Associate Ray Elwood finished fourth, the only other of our players to compete in the event. Claudia had a wide smile on her face as she walked over to them.

"Second place folks, that's 21 points for Shawnee House." She had gotten nine points for her overall finish, and 12 for winning the Junior Year standings. Drew had netted a perfect 24 for his win, and would obviously be tied at the end of the day for the overall lead, as participants could only compete in one event per day.

Reiko was first up, and she pushed as hard as she could to get that last bit of speed out of her broom. She grabbed the hoop perfectly, and executed her best turn yet. She crossed the finish line in as good a tuck as she could, and saw her time on the scoreboard: 1:12.33, a time that was four tenths faster than her previous best. These Nike brooms had a built in speed governor that restricted it to 70 miles an hour unless taken off.....which every buyer tended to do, but they were left on for this exercise, not wanting to risk any injuries with over aggressive flyers. Most flyers lost a ton of speed in the turn and also had to slow down to make sure they grabbed the hoop on their first pass, hence the math problem.

Of the next four flyers, two of them bettered her time, putting Reiko in 12th place overall, with only the next three flyers not having beaten her time in previous rounds. One of them was next up: Fred, who really didn't like the Nike broom he was being forced to use, it having much different braking than the Nimbus 2001 he was accustomed to using. He did a daring 180 degree swimming style flip turn as he grabbed the hoop in mid-turn, and rocketed back with a time of 1:10.97. Two flyers later George did a strikingly similar turn, and came in at 1:10.89. Fred was now out five galleons so far, with three more events to go. He grumbled about it good naturedly, but was happy with his result anyway. They were fourth and fifth, behind only the earlier times of Harry, Jonas, and Bouton.

By the time Jim Bouton came up, the twins were still four-five in the standings, assuring Cortez of three top-five finishes, with Jefferson taking the other two. Bouton, almost assured of being the top pick in next month's Quodpot Draft, was a fantastic flyer, and easily beat the twins' mark, with a 1:09.76. This bettered Harry's and Jonas' previous bests as well, so it was a race for the medals. Harry was up first.

At the sound of whistle he went as hard as he could, picking up speed quickly as he went on as straight a line as he could to the hoop. For this round, he had put one of Warrick's bandanas over his hair, and he would never know if it helped or not with the wind resistance, but.....He did a twin style flip at the hoop, done even better since he was smaller, and raced for the finish line, going full tilt.....yes!

1:09.70.

Bouton's head was in his hands in mock agony, as Harry's unfamiliarity with the Nike brakes nearly planted him headfirst into the wall. Bouton had finished second the year before, behind his best friend Ryan Chappelle, and had hoped to take the title this time, only to lose out by less than a tenth of a second. Jonas was up next, and could do no worse than last year's performance: third.

The rest of the gang was kind of torn here. One of them was going to win, another finish second or third, and the twins rounding out the top five. This was their day, but who to root for? Harry solved that problem for all seven of them.

"Come on Jonas, take me out mate!" The others let loose their cheers too, as he mounted his broom.

But it was not to be, Jonas flew too aggressively and just lightly clipped the Quidditch hoop on his turn. His final time was seventh best of the finals, but his second round time held up for third place overall, and second in Junior Year. The official top five and gang standings:

Harry: First overall and first in Junior Year: 24 points

Jim Bouton: Second overall and first in Senior Year: 21 points

Jonas: Third overall and second in Junior Year: 17 points

George: Fourth overall and second in Senior Year: 16 points

Fred: Fifth overall and third in Senior Year: 14 points

Reiko: Tenth overall and fourth in Junior Year: 8 points

Warrick: Twenty-Seventh overall and tenth in Junior Year: 1 point

They had all scored something, as Cortez won the day by far in the Flying Challenge. The gang had accumulated a whopping 80 points in Flying, along with 45 for Drew and Claudia. There was talk at dinner about trying to secede and form their own House, but it didn't

get anywhere after a few younger kids gave them dirty looks. Some people just don't have a sense of humor.

Other events that day included Arithmancy, Muggle Studies, Potions featuring a second place finish by Joe Clancy, and the Astronomy competition that would take place at midnight.

The Day One Champions:

Drew Baylor, Junior, Jefferson House, Shield Builder

Laura Nelson, Senior, Proctor House, Arithmancy Problem Solver

Miguel Alvarez, Junior, Jefferson House, Potions Swelling Solution Contest

Reggie Turner, Senior, Cortez House, Muggle Studies Trivia Challenge

Harry Potter, Junior, Cortez House, Flying Challenge

Jennifer Keller, Senior, Jefferson House, History Trivial Pursuit

Tom Hughes, Transition, Jefferson House, Astronomy Map Quest

The standings after Day One:

Jefferson: 901 points

Cortez: 820 points

Proctor: 670 points

Shawnee: 574 points

Claudia's second place was one of the few bright spots for her House, while the Cortez flying brigade made up for poor results in Muggle Studies and Astronomy. The House was very happy though, with their three British free agent signings for 54 points out of their total. Jefferson felt pretty good as well, and a lot of their strongest events

were coming the next couple of days. The surprise point scorer was Proctor Novice Betsy Smith, who finished sixth in the Muggle Studies competition, despite the fact that her year wasn't taking the class yet.

Tuesday, May 12, 1997

Ancient Runes Classroom B

10:00 am

Harry was off this day, as he had the Dodge-a-thon coming on Wednesday. Sophie was in action in the Runes Translation Game, as was Warrick. Warrick was rather hard to slot in any event, since he was not outstanding at any subject, just very good in all of them. So he was plugged into spots that he might not ordinarily go into. He was due to compete in the Transfiguration event in three days with Sophie, and would be doing the obstacle course with Harry and Reiko on Saturday.....where one would think Sophie would be, but she was in this Transfiguration event, a Charms event on Thursday, as well as the Dodge-a-thon coming up the next day.

The Runes Translation Game was kind of like one of those Survivor Immunity Challenges, whereby the contestants had to go around a large room and translate the Runes to get them to their next stop. There were 13 stops to make, with each round using six students. Top two from each round advanced, and the next round cut the field to its final eight students. The field was a little smaller due to the absence of Novice and Freshman students. Warrick, somehow, made the semi-finals, eliminating two students who were in the Advanced class in the bargain. Sophie, who had missed an O on her Runes OWL by one question, made the semi-finals as well. Harry watched the proceedings with a kind of confused cheer, in that he was there just to root on his girlfriend and roommate, while not understanding much of what they were doing.

While all of this was going on, Claudia was doing the Muggle Studies Matrix, while Reiko joined her nemesis Joe Clancy in the second and final Potions competition, a two-day event to grow a Strengthening Potion. This was done in pairs, and no, the two were not teamed up. Reiko was teamed with Marie Ford, a non-roommate who had been

the one to direct the twins to the Lounge on the day of the battle. Joe was paired with his former roommate Terry DiCarlo, the one who could tolerate him most, though it was only a matter of degrees. Drew and Jonas were sitting out the day as well, with Fred and George, very reluctantly, also in the Potions competition. They had been the hardest of the Seniors to slot, since the committee had only known them for less than a month. But Potions was one of their strengths, so there they were.

Lunch was full of grumbling by Reiko, Fred and George, none of whom wanted to be in their events. Reiko brought along her teammate Ford, who the twins immediately started in on.

“Hey, look who it is. You know we really are werewolves right?”

“Yeah, you got suckered big time.” Reiko merely waved her hand at them, but thankfully did not cuff them on the backs of their collective heads. Though she wanted to.

“Just ignore them Marie, we all do.”

“We will not be ignored!”

“Please don’t be creepy you two, Fatal Attraction is a movie, not real life.” They looked confused, though they figured it was a movie of some sort.

“What’s Fatal Attraction? Hogwarts doesn’t have televisions you know.”

“Oh be quiet, or I’ll spike your potion when you’re not looking.”

“Feel free, we don’t want to be there anyway. How many hours until the Reducto Challenge Harry?” Harry was chuckling, as Claudia finally came up to the table, her first round having gone on a bit longer than expected.

“It’s on Friday guys, don’t make me think of hours on my day off.”

“FRIDAY!?”

“You cannot be serious!” Claudia in particular was not in the mood for this.

“Oh be quiet you two, you can destroy things in three days time, isn’t that enough?”

“Rough day at the Muggle Studies event Claudia dear?”

“Oh sod off you two.” She was half smiling though.

“I love it when our friends try to be British George.”

“It’s always good for a laugh Fred, particularly when they do it so badly, I guess Harry here didn’t rub off on them as much as we had thought. You made the next round didn’t you?”

“Yes I did thank you. You two should have been there, you’re taking Muggle Studies.” They looked at her like she was insane.

“One month of Muggle Studies isn’t really enough you know, even if we had paid attention at Hogwarts, its still different stuff.”

“And we most certainly did not pay attention at Hogwarts.”

“As if we would have bothered.”

“We did pay attention in Potions though, we had the joke shop idea even then. Hell, we did better than Junior here on the Potions OWL, and Snape did not exactly love us either Harry.”

“Hey, I didn’t say anything!”

“You were thinking it.”

“Says you.”

“Damn right says us.....we.....whatever.”

Marie Ford just sat there, bemused, all the rumors she'd heard about these people were being confirmed with lightning speed. Not that they were bad rumors, she found the lot of them to be pretty funny actually.

“We even get cheated out of a day off, since our thing is over two days. Lattimore and his cronies are getting pranked the minute this stuff is over.” A hush went over the table, as everyone realized that there was a stranger among them.

“Oh don't worry about it, everyone knows it's the bunch of you doing that stuff.”

The gang was somewhat insular for the most part, but they had still assumed all that. Harry just glared at his partners.

“Like I always say.....” Reiko interrupted him.

“Assuming and knowing are two different things.”

“I'm getting too predictable, I'm going to have to come up with a new saying.”

“Yet another summer project for you.”

“Among many others. But enough about me. Marie, tell us all about yourself, that's a nice, safe topic here.” Drew half muttered his agreement as he bit into his chicken club sandwich.

“One that will generate no violence.” Harry nodded emphatically.

“Drew knows about these things Marie, so cough it up. We won't make fun.” And they didn't, the twins being too busy stewing, pun intended, over their Potions hassles.

So Marie Ford gave the five minute tour of who she was. She was in various classes with the gang, including Advanced Potions with Reiko

of course, but also in Transfiguration with Warrick and Harry, and Charms with Claudia and Warrick. So its not like she was a stranger to them, though Harry was wondering internally what she was doing at the table, not that he minded, a new face was welcome as long as no secrets were being bandied about. Marie was from Cincinnati, right on the border area on the map between Salem and Great Lakes. She was about 5'6 and was rather cute, though currently single at the moment. Sophie and Reiko knew her somewhat, as all the Junior Year girls had a tenuous bond just by being girls in the same year, but Claudia and the guys had never much spoken to her.

After the meal, everyone went back to their events, and as Harry, Sophie, and Warrick walked to the Runes room, he queried his girlfriend.

“What was that all about?”

“You mean Marie?” No, the Martians that had just invaded....but he was smart enough to keep the sarcasm to his own self for the moment.

“Yeah, seems kind of weird.” She dug her nails lightly into his palm and said mock airily.

“Don’t be a snob Harry.”

“I am certainly not a snob, she was perfectly nice.”

“Then what’s the problem?” It then slammed into place for Harry, Warrick keeping out of this conversation.

“Is she playing matchmaker? For who? Drew or Jonas?” Sophie had sussed this out immediately, but hadn’t mentioned anything in public. She was a bit sharper on such matters than her beau.

“I honestly don’t know Harry, I didn’t know they were even partnered up until this morning.”

“Well she seems nice enough.” Warrick then felt he should say something.

“She’s for Drew, I don’t see Jonas going for her, or vice versa.”

“Why wouldn’t he? She’s not as good looking as our ladies, but she’s on the next level.” Very good answer Harry, and he was rewarded with a hand squeeze.

“She’s for Drew, I have it on good authority.” Harry and Sophie stopped in their tracks and stared at him.

“Oh really?”

“I have a certain access to Reiko’s sinister mind that neither of you do.” Harry gave a thoughtful sigh.

“Well that’s a development.”

“She figures with Kristy graduating, it’s about time that Drew had a proper girlfriend, now that we’re all coupled up, outside of Hound Dog.” Harry and Sophie mulled this over as they reached the Runes site, but once they got to the room it was time to focus on business.

Warrick went out with barely a whimper in the semi-finals, while Sophie squeaked into the finals in the eighth and last spot. The finals went a lot easier for Harry, as Warrick was there to mutter to him about what the Runes actually meant. Hermione had always tried to interest him in this subject, figuring that she could manufacture someone to talk to about one of her interests, but one read through of chapter one of her third year textbook had given him a migraine just as bad as any of Voldemort’s scar taunts. That ended that experiment, and this wasn’t going any easier.

Sophie improved one slot to finish seventh, an improvement of 20 places from the year before, so she was very pleased with her effort. She finished third in the Junior Year, and thus garnered 12 points for Cortez, while Warrick squeaked out two points for finishing ninth in the Junior class. Claudia would finish another strong third in her

Muggle Studies event, which was along the same lines as her History event the day before. She had another History event on Friday, and was also entered in Saturday's obstacle course. Second and third place finishes for her were very encouraging, with another strong event coming Friday.

The Potions event would not be decided until the following day, to the twins' immense irritation, so the scores would count on that day as well. Events, in addition to Muggle Studies and Ancient Runes, were held in Charms and Herbology. It was notable that Reiko, due to slotting as always, did not compete in the Charms Animation Challenge, in spite of being the number one student in Charms for the Junior Class.....nor were the second or third ranked students competing either, a couple of gents named Harry Potter and Drew Baylor. Professors Maloney and Westin were not pleased with this development, and resolved to have a stern word with the Senior leaders. They would have to stand in line of course, a very long one. This kind of thing happened every year, and more than a few teachers got a bit cranky about slotting.

Day Two Champions:

Julie Kent, Senior, Jefferson House, Ancient Runes Challenge

Reggie Turner, Senior, Cortez House, Muggle Studies Blind Draw Problem Solving

Yuki Endo, Junior, Proctor House, Herbology Grow Challenge

Jack Straw, Junior, Proctor House, Charms Animation

Reggie Turner's only E or above on his OWL had been Muggle Studies, but he went yard on both the Muggle Studies events in his final Olympics, though he would not gain a point for the rest of the week. Proctor House had a terrible day overall, but Yuki Endo and Jack Straw were bright spots.

The standings after Day Two:

Jefferson: 471 points on the day 1372 for the week

Cortez: 390 points on the day 1210 for the week

Shawnee: 380 points on the day 954 for the week

Proctor: 355 points on the day 1025 for the week

Jefferson had extended its lead by a significant margin, while Shawnee had made up some of the deficit to try and squeeze out of last place.

Wednesday, May 14, 1997

Defense Classroom A

10:00 am

Time for the Dodge-a-thon, one of four Defense type events taking place, including Shield Builder, Reducto Challenge, and the obstacle course. Great Lakes was very prideful of its Defense program to be sure, and this was the only subject in which four events took place. Charms and Transfiguration had three apiece, and the others had two, even Astronomy had another due this evening at midnight. Harry and Sophie were the only gang members taking part in this event, the others being needed elsewhere. Drew was getting a little rusty, having two days off in a row, with three more events coming in the next three days. Claudia and Warrick likewise were off, with Reiko, Fred, and George completing their Potions event. Jonas, despite being in Advanced Potions, had called in enough chits with his longtime teammate Jim Bouton and gotten out of the Potions events, and was slated for Charms the next day. Jonas was by far the weakest gang member in Defense, and it was his worst subject overall. Because of his 'reputation', and his athletic prowess, Jonas had always been thought of as a thinker/lover, not a fighter. Harry was fascinated by the possibility of a Jonas v. Ron duel though, thinking that it would be one of relative equals. If Ron showed up to the Hollow, he would try to maneuver this into happening.

The Dodge-a-thon was pretty much the Shield Builder competition, without shields. There were two attackers, again using only non-lethal

hexes and jinxes, and they fired until the student had at all four of their appendages touching the ground. So the idea was to either not get hit, or get hit on your arms and upper chest, to make it less likely to go down. The competitors had a 20 foot square area to move around in this time, though the lines around it could be touched, just not totally crossed. Also, the contestants were not allowed to use magic against the attackers, either by wand or by hand. The Junior Year Basic Combat students had spread the word that this event was already locked for Harry, having bragged to their Housemates about his dodging ability.....which like Ron said, came mostly from his daily battles with Dudley as a child. Ron wasn't a total dullard after all, he knew his 'friend' very well indeed. The betting money, and there were literally hundreds of small side bets going on during the week, was overwhelmingly on Harry. Even Joe Clancy had five bucks riding on him, having bet a gullible Novice, though he had to give the Novice the rest of the field, with no odds.

Dodging spells was taught at every level of Defense at Great Lakes, unlike Hogwarts where it was not taught at all. That might be one reason why there were so few overweight kids taking Defense at Great Lakes, it just wasn't worth the hassle of getting constantly nailed during dodging lessons. So this event was quite popular, since pretty much anyone could do it, magically powerful or not. This was a full field event, 84 kids, and like the Flying Challenge, went in order of year. There were only three rounds this time, due to the physicality of it, and the cuts were at 30 after each of the first two rounds, with 24 kids making the finals. Times from the early rounds did not carry over to the following ones, so the students would have to go full bore each time. Due to the number of participants, there would be two dodging areas during the first round, with contestants often overlapping with each other. The first round still took a bit over three hours to complete though.

The highlights of the first round included Shawnee Novice Karen Yeo, who had been a gymnast until her magical letter came, and she put on quite the clinic with a time of 2:49.23. She finished with the third best time behind Harry and Sally Jenkins, who had finished seventh in the Flying Challenge, the top score for Transition and younger. Harry found this event to be a just another rehash of what Ripley put them through once a month, and a bit easier. The contestants were

assured that they 'attackers' were going at them equally hard in each round, but Sophie had told Harry that no one really believed them. Sophie herself ranked fifth with a time of 2:45.65 after the first round, a drop of one from the year before, when she had won the Transition Year competition while finishing fourth overall. Harry had kept careful track of what the top score was, Sally's, and as soon as he beat it by ten seconds, he allowed himself to be knocked down. Ripley and Greenleaf, neither of them doing the attacking in this round, both raised their collective eyebrows at him as he walked off the floor.

"You're not quite that good an actor yet Harry." He just grinned at them.

"I read the rules Professor Greenleaf, there's nothing in there that says I have to give it my all in every round."

"Just be careful, it might come back to burn you later."

"I'll take my chances." If there was one event where Harry knew he was a lock, it was this one. No Senior finished with a top five time, fourth place going to Cortez Apprentice Martha Muir, so Harry's first round time of 3:05.45 easily stood up. He wasn't even breathing hard at the end of it, and had only been grazed twice before he allowed himself to be hit on purpose. Still, Drew and Warrick made a point of levitating him all the way to the Dining Hall for lunch. Sophie had looked at Claudia mock sternly as they did.

"Don't even think about it Claudia."

"This is my day off Sophie, I'm resting. Just walk slowly and you can catch your breath better."

"Yes dear."

Lunch was interrupted by the arrival of the Potions people, who were finally done. The twins actually looked happy for once, and it wasn't because their Potions ordeal was finished. Jonas came with them, he had been 'cheering' them on. Fred theatrically puffed out his chest.

“Fifth place people, how do you like them apples eh? Third in the Senior Class to boot!” There was a moment of silence at the table before Drew hit first.

“No, seriously, how did you guys do?”

“Don’t ruin our moment mate, we kicked ass.” Drew quickly responded.

“How many Seniors even take Potions?”

“Not that many, or so we’re told. Still, a fruitful day for Cortez House.” Indeed it was, as Reiko and Marie had finished third, with Joe Clancy and Terry DiCarlo finishing second. Points were doubled in this event, with so few entrants, each student getting the points for his or her place, even though the work was shared. Still, Reiko was glad of her finish. Due to the slotting issues, and her being great or near great at everything, she was rarely put in events where she could likely win.....such as Potions and flying. So the top ranked student in Junior Year was going to be fortunate to place top 10 in her Year here.

“So how did you two do?”

“I was fifth in the first round, do you even need to be told how my man did?” No one was surprised there.

“Not really, how big is your lead Harry?”

“Ten seconds.”

“That’s it?”

“I’m breaking myself in slowly.”

“You’re just being lazy.” Not an untrue statement.

“I’ll go full bore in the finals, don’t worry. Sophie, you’re going to let me win, right?”

“I’m going to let you do your best, how’s that?”

“Good enough.” He then dug into his fruit salad, wanting nothing heavy slowing him down. He remained silent for the 20 minute debate that followed. The debate consisted mainly of whether or not Harry would tank the finals if Sophie was in first place before Harry’s final go. Sophie didn’t say much either, though she made a point of grabbing Harry on the way back to the competition.

“Don’t hold back Harry, you know I wouldn’t want to win that way.”

“I wouldn’t hold back even if you asked me to Sophie, and I know you would never ask. I’ve got to admit, I’ve got the taste in my mouth for the Overall title.”

“You and Drew, should be interesting. If he wins Charms tomorrow you’ll be tied, though I’ll be rooting for Reiko.” The Charms competition the next day had an ‘air’ theme, and that was Reiko’s strength. The tied thing assumed a Harry victory of course.

The second round, as per usual, went a lot more quickly, though the times did not go up that much. Sally Jenkins increased her hold on second place over Karen Yeo by half a second, while Sophie switched places with Martha Muir and moved into the fourth spot, though she lost time to Yeo. Harry again let 10 seconds go by after he beat Jenkins time, just to make a small point, though he was only hit once this time before he allowed it. Jenkins was getting a little annoyed with him toying with her like that, and after the Quidditch debacle, was none too fond of him in the first place. She walked up to the gang after the round was finished, with a 30 minute break before the final 24 went.

“What the hell are you doing Harry?”

“I’m winning the competition so far Sally, I would have thought that was obvious. I’m not required to go all out until the final round, and not even then.”

“You’re going to beat me by one second, aren’t you?” Harry had barely thought of Jenkins since the Quidditch game, and the idea of him targeting her here caused him to break out in a fit of giggles. That only made her angrier, which only made his mirth harder to control.

“I’m going all out in the finals Sally, however slowly you manage to dodge. Are you sure you’re recovered from the game? A lot of penalties you took from my overzealous brothers. Don’t think about that though, you’ll be fine.” Harry walked away, still shaking a bit from laughter. Jenkins just stared after him, not knowing what to do. Reiko lightly shook a finger at her.

“Don’t even think about it Sally, just leave it alone. Quidditch was nothing personal, and you know it.” Jenkins knew that much, she and Harry hadn’t so much as spoken a word to each other since the summer pick-up games, and barely even then. She wasn’t part of the gang, in any of his classes, in Cortez, or a WWW customer.....being none of those things wasn’t likely to get one a Harry based conversation, at least a pleasant one anyway.

“Just make sure he does his best in the final. I don’t mind losing if he does, but nobody likes being mocked.” She stalked off.

“Did you hear that Fred, nobody likes being mocked?”

“She looked familiar somehow. George, wasn’t she the girl that was pretty much our chew toy in that Quidditch game?”

“She was indeed Fred. Second place isn’t good enough for some people I suppose. Junior better bury her or he’ll answer to us.”

“Right, and it would be nice if you would nail her too Sophie.” Sophie didn’t get a chance to respond before Fred did it for her.

“Maybe we should volunteer to be the people that fire at her, she won’t finish second then. Let’s go George.” They went off to speak to the Defense guys, who were not crazy enough to give them what they wanted of course.

The final round saw nothing shakeup in the bottom half, with places 13-24 not change more than one place for any individual. The next few contestants really messed things up, as Dan Yates, a Cortez Sophomore, leapt from 12th to 6th, with fifth place Martha Muir beating him by only one one-hundredth of a second. Places seven through eleven completely changed as well, with the last four coming up.

Sophie was first, and with the gang cheering her on the whole time, she added five seconds to her previous best time. This was in spite of getting hit numerous times and being on one hand more than once. Her final time was 2:53.56, and she was guaranteed fourth place again, and second in Junior Year unless Harry had a heart attack or something in the next 10 minutes. Then she would take over the top spot in their year. That was not to be though.

Karen Yeo was in very good shape for a 12 year old, but she was a little tuckered out after a long day of worrying and dodging. This was manifested in her 2:53.12 time, which dropped her to fourth place.....still the best placing by a Novice all week so far, there was usually one Novice top ten during an Olympic Week in some event and this appeared to be the one.....plus Betsy Smith in Muggle Studies on the first day. Both of them would be ones to watch in the coming years.

Sally Jenkins had in fact gotten a little unnerved by the Harry’s psychological salvos, and by the twins standing as close as they were allowed to, right in front of the small crowd of onlookers.

They were doing nothing but smiling at her.

Not even evil grins, just friendly smiles, which shook her all the more. They weren’t worried about Harry, they wanted Sophie to get second if possible. But it was not to be.

Jenkins' final time was 2:54.67, her worst time of the day, but still good enough to clinch second overall and first in Transition. The Jefferson onlookers all cheered her, even Jonas and Drew clapped politely. They much preferred their close friend to take second, House be damned. That was an easy position to take though, considering that Jefferson had a very large overall lead.

Harry proceeded to put on a dodging clinic, being grazed probably a dozen times over the course of his round, but never being full on hit until he slipped right at the end. Harry's technique involved presenting the narrowest possible profile to the 'shooters', who by rule were limited in their ability to move around as well. He took baby steps to keep his balance, and constantly shifted his vision so that at least one shooter was always his primary focus. His final time was an amazing 5:40.43, less than nine seconds shy of double Sally Jenkins' mark. Indeed only Sally, Sophie, Karen Yeo, and Martha Muir finished within half of Harry's time. And he only stopped because he slipped, and Greenleaf managed to nail him immediately afterwards and drop him.

This time he was pretty exhausted afterward, and didn't mind the guys levitating him upright.

"Bloody amazing Harry."

"I got tired just watching, and that was at the three minute mark."

"Now you know why I was sandbagging in the first two rounds, I needed all my strength." That was Harry talking to Sally Jenkins, who had grown more incredulous with each second after Harry passed her time, and had come up to congratulate him.

"That was something Harry, I'm glad I got to see it." She reached out her hand and Harry shook it.

"Thanks Sally."

"I'm in big trouble in this event from now on, you'll win next year, and that Karen Yeo girl will probably win after that."

“She was pretty impressive wasn’t she?”

“She should have stayed a muggle and tried to compete in the real Olympics. Anyway, congrats Harry.” She walked off, and everyone felt a little better about the overall situation. Fred looked over at Jonas.

“ So Jonas, are you still going to ‘recruit’ her?” He gave an exaggerated wink that would have pissed Claudia off to high heaven, before she met a certain dreadlocked man.

“I’m mulling it over, do you want details if I succeed?”

“Of course, we’re writing a book about all this, we need good stories for it.”

“A book?”

“Sure, about all of this. It’s called Fred and George in the Land of Insanity. What do you think? The title too spot on?” Reiko turned to Harry.

“Harry, please punish these two.” Oh no, he wasn’t going there.

“Please leave me out of this, I have a victory to celebrate and I don’t want to wind up in the med station anytime soon.” Everyone laughed, and went off to dinner, with Harry and Sophie taking a few minutes to shower.

Not together, Harry was tired.

Dinner was loud and raucous throughout the room, the competition was half over and most students had done at least one event so far. The last three days would have fewer events per day, so a lot of students got to be spectators.

Day Three Champions:

Harry Potter, Junior, Cortez House, Dodge-a-thon

Jack Straw, Junior, Proctor House, Transfiguration Marathon

Janet Evans and Tracey McFarlane, Seniors, Jefferson House, Potions Swelling Event

Jodie Kramer, Senior, Jefferson House, Charms Marathon

Tanya Roycraft, Senior, Shawnee House, Ancient Runes Decipher Cipher

Jack Straw had quietly crept into a tie with Harry for first place, with two wins out of two events. He was scheduled to do the Charms event the next day, and the Transfiguration event on Friday, and was considered a contender in both for the win. It was thus entirely possible to have two students with 96 points each, as Harry was now the gambling favorite to win both The Reducto Challenge and The obstacle course. Straw was a WWW customer, and his best friend and roommate was our man Ray Elwood, who was doing pretty well for the week himself. Straw, like his roommate, was on good terms with the gang, without being a candidate for future membership. It should be assumed however, that he knew all about Ray's involvement in the Proctor House portions of the gangs' handiwork.

The standings after Day Three

Jefferson: 609 points 1981 at the halfway mark

Cortez: 604 points 1814 at the halfway mark

Shawnee: 504 points 1458 at the halfway mark

Proctor: 439 points 1464 at the halfway mark

Jefferson's lead only grew slightly, but it still grew, and the House members grew more and more confident about their overall chances. Shawnee and Proctor were all but out of it, but had a spirited battle for non-last place going. Harry, Jack Straw, and Reggie Turner were all tied for first place for the individual title, though Drew was yet to

weigh in with his second event, which would be the big Charms finale on Thursday.

Thursday, May 15, 1997

Charms Classroom F

10:00 am

Today was the last of the three Charms events, the Air Apparent challenge. This event had Drew, Sophie, Jonas, and Reiko all competing, with Harry, Claudia, and the twins having the day off. This was the one event that Reiko was favored to do well in, and she was burning with the desire to come away with a title this week, all but conceding the obstacle course to Harry or Drew. It should be noted that the Olympics did not impact a student's class rank at all, so despite having no chance at grabbing the Junior Year title, Reiko was still on track to end the year as the top ranked student in her class, followed by Drew, Sophie, Jack Straw, and Harry, who had slipped past Ray Elwood into fifth.

The Charms events changed from year to year for the most part, and Reiko had finished second overall in two of them last year, and this one event was a holdover from the year before. The contestant had to keep multiple objects going in the air for as long as possible. The objects, ranging from a muggle penny to a medicine ball, were initially lying on the floor, and the contestant had to raise them magically, one by one and keep them in the air for as long as possible. The scoring started when the second object became airborne, and each object that left the floor increased the competitor's score accordingly. So the idea was to juggle as many objects in the air as possible, for as long as possible. The objects were charmed to denote how long they had stayed airborne, and how far in the air they were, with a hub object that kept track of all of them. It was much like a computer simulation, except with magic and the like. Since this was a full field event, there were two areas running concurrently, so that all 84 students could get their first round in before lunch interrupted matters. There were only two rounds in the competition, due to the exhausting nature of the task, and the scores from both rounds were combined, though the field was cut to 30 after the first round.

The Novice and Freshman competitors, who were not well trained in this kind of thing, went first, and they went pretty quickly. The longest time they scored was 1:43.32, by Freshman Jane Abbott, familiar to you as the Cortez Keeper in Quidditch. She didn't have many objects in the air at once though, but her score of 84 points still carried the day for her class. As the competitors got older, the times got a little longer. There were two avenues to pursue when it came to strategy for this event: One, was to aim for time and keep relatively few objects going in the air at once; Two, get as many in the air as possible and just hold on until they all dropped. So there was more than one way to skin the proverbial cat, as each had pros and cons points-wise.

It was after noon by the time that our players took the 'field', so to speak. Jonas went first, and managed to go a solid 3:45.54, with a total score of 343 points. He chose the middle ground of the two options from above. He got five objects into the air almost immediately, and kept them going for almost the entirety of his time in the area. Jonas had not done this event last year, and was very pleased with his time overall. Sophie followed him, and her time was over 12 seconds longer at 3:56.67, but only had four objects going most of the time. Her score was 349 points, and vaulted her into first place overall.

Jack Straw, bidding to do a four event sweep, was next up, but was unable to overtake Jonas for second place, and finished with 329 points, with Amanda Knight likewise falling short at 323 points. None of the other Juniors could pass Jonas or Sophie until there were two more Juniors left: Drew and Reiko.

Drew gradually drew, no pun intended, things out over the course of the first two minutes. He gradually lifted more and more objects into the air until he had seven of them floating over three feet off of the ground on the average. This was well over what Sophie and Jonas had done, and they could see the strain on Drew's face as he kept them going as long as he could. At the 4:53 mark he finally set them down at once, collapsing on the ground himself, though not nearly to the point of unconsciousness. His score was 453 points, and he was far and away in the lead.

Reiko did him better, by lasting 5:30.32 and keeping five in the air, in a dominating performance even more impressive than Drew's. Reiko was the smallest woman in her year, but her magic was concentrated in her 5'1" frame, and her concentration was beyond all but Harry, honed from years of listening to her Charms teaching parents talking no doubt. Speaking of Harry, he stood in the crowd of onlookers with Claudia and the twins, and he found himself sidling up to Maloney after Reiko was finished, with a score of 467 points.

"Any shot that I could have a go next week with this event? The time would be just between you and I, no one else." Maloney was just as curious as he was, so she had no problem with the idea.

"I don't see that being a problem, just hang back after class on Wednesday. No witnesses, you sure?"

"I'm sure, let's just tell people that I had some questions about something. I'll figure out a story."

"No problem Harry. Just out of curiosity, who are you rooting for beside Sophie?" His girlfriend's best friend, or Drew, who Harry was hanging out with more and more. He chose the diplomatic route, not wanting to answer that question even in his own mind.

"I just want one of us to win ma'am."

"Good answer."

He walked away, and was queried by Claudia.

"What was that all about?"

"Just asking some questions about the objects, that's all." She bought that, or so it seemed, and they watched the Seniors compete, none of them cracking the top four.....a top four completely comprised of gang members, which had only come close to happening in the Flying Challenge, which was 1-3-4-5 for the gang.

The Great Lakes Senior Class was having a disastrous Olympics thus far, winning the overall in less than half the events, and was behind the very talented Juniors in overall points, though thankfully the Transitions weren't eating the Seniors' lunch as well.

The four competitors slept through most of lunch, aided by a short-term sleeping draught that the twins had in their part of the trunk. The twins, as self aware as any 19 year olds were likely to get, fully admitted that this event would not have been for them, even though Charms was their best subject. Their Charms expertise was more on the smaller scale, with tiny objects. With mayhem preferably involved.

They woke up by 1:30 for a 2:00 pm start, the competitors went in reverse order of their first round scores, least to most. The highlight of the early part of the final round was Jared Posthumus, a Jefferson House youngster who was the only Sophomore or younger to make the final round. He leapfrogged 12 places to finish an impressive 16th overall. Charms seemed to be his thing, as he won his year in all three Charms events, with the obstacle course coming up for him. Certainly a name to watch for the coming years. Jack Straw's combined time put him in first place overall, with the four gang members to go. He had beaten his first round score by a little bit, but the week's events, this was his third with just Transfiguration the next day to go, had perhaps taken just enough out of him. Still, Straw's score of 683 was the one to beat.

Jonas went first, but was unable to duplicate his first round success. He had trouble keeping the fifth object airborne, and his score suffered for it. His second round score was 321, for a total of 664. This was still good enough for fifth place, with two more events to go for him, a pair of top fives was nothing to sneeze at. He preferred to think that he had maximized his potential with the first round, rather than tanking the final one. Sophie followed, and while she did not improve on her morning performance, she still had enough of a cushion over Straw to retain third place overall, with a score of 345 for the session, and 693 overall. Drew and Reiko were so far ahead after the first round that she knew she was third, but was still very pleased with her score. She, unlike Reiko and Jonas, had done this event the year before, and this year's finish was a leap of 13 spots for her.

Drew, using his light early week schedule to maximum benefit, had an even longer time in the second round, going just over five minutes with now eight objects up there for him by the end. His second round score was 484 points, for a total of 937, easily taking the lead. He slumped into a chair conjured for him by the twins, and barely able to stay awake to watch his friend take her turn.

Nothing would stop Reiko this time, she used every iota of magical power and endurance that she had, and then some, as she extended her time past the six minute mark. She had asked Maloney to inform her when she passed Drew's time, and while she was levitating fewer objects, she went much longer than he did.....just long enough as it turned out. She went in with a 14 point lead and wound up with a 10 point margin. It was her first overall Olympic title, and it was very satisfying for her. She walked off the floor into Warrick's arms, and he twirled her around as everyone applauded.

"That's my girl!" This was a bit of victory for Warrick as well, as he was likely never to win an overall title, or a class title for that matter. He could live vicariously through his girlfriend and his roommate though, and was likely to have a Quidditch Cup to celebrate in about a month too.

Drew somehow managed to lift himself out of his chair, and raised Reiko's hand into the air.

"Congrats Reiko, you deserve it."

"Thanks Drew, we really kicked ass didn't we.....err, sorry Sophie, Jonas." The third and fifth place finishers were both smiling large.

"You did kick our asses roommate, but we did pretty well." Jonas nodded in hearty agreement.

"Yes we did, the only bad thing is that all four ahead of me are Juniors, no moving up next year unless I get lucky with the slotting." He was still smiling as he said this, so it wasn't moping. Jonas was very comfortable with where he stood academically, knowing that his

Quodpot prowess would make him a wealthy young man, not to mention what was awaiting him at Steele and Family Investments. Anything he did in the Olympics was icing on the cake as far as he was concerned.

The gang retired to the trunks for a brief celebration.....well brief for Drew, who had the Reducto Challenge the next day, and would wind up taking a short, 14 hour nap. The Reducto Challenge would also feature Harry and the twins, who were all eagerly looking forward to the destruction-to-be.

Day Four Champions:

Reiko Aylesworth, Junior, Cortez House, Charms Air Apparent.

Ed Lattimore, Senior, Cortez House, Arithmancy Speed Work

Yuki Endo, Junior, Proctor House, Herbology Safety Destruction Event

Rachel Kessler, Transition, Cortez House, Astronomy Selection Grid

Ed Lattimore won his first title in seven years of competing in the Olympics, joining his Quodpot title from four years previous as trophies in his case. Admired and greatly respected in his House, it was a nice cap on his magical academic career. Yuki Endo, whose father taught Herbology at Pathfinder, was one of several students who swept a subject's events. Rachel Kessler was notable as the student who bought the most WWW merchandise in the school over the course of the year. She came from a rich family, and enjoyed giving out the pranks as presents to friends and family. This endeared her to Harry and the twins, and they had quietly given her a 'preferred customer' discount, on the condition that she tell no one about it or act as agent for any other students. If she had been a year younger, Harry might have thought about turning the keys over to her with the selling.....which he was still thinking of doing, she was smart and pretty cool. It was something to ponder over the next couple of months.

The standings after Day Four:

Cortez: 475 points2289 points for the week

Jefferson:456 points2437 points for the week

Proctor:412 points1876 points for the week

Shawnee: 367 points1825 points for the week

Cortez finally won a day, due more to its successes in the other events besides Charms, as Ed Lattimore wasn't the only Cortez star in Arithmancy. The overall title was still very much up for grabs, as was the third place slot, though Proctor had extended its lead in that area.

Friday, May 16, 1997

10:00 am

Transfiguration Classroom B

Defense Classroom D

History Classroom A

This was a busy day for our players, as only Reiko was off for the day. Claudia was entered into the History By the Book competition, with Sophie, Jonas, and Warrick in the Transfiguration Build Upon event. Harry, Drew, Fred, and George were all in the Reducto Challenge. At day's end though, only Sophie would be done, as the rest of them were in the obstacle course on Saturday. Reiko, after some deliberation, chose to watch the Transfiguration event that included her boyfriend and best friend, though it should be noted that no spectators were allowed in the History and Muggle Studies events, due to the hassle of having muzzle them.....there had been incidents in previous years of 'helping'.

Claudia, emboldened by her second and third place finishes earlier in the week, easily won the first round. The By The Book event dealt with facts and stories out of History Through the Years, the textbook

that Josh Lyman taught out of, for all the five years of students taking History of Magic. Like most magical volumes, this one regenerated itself magically, thus keeping up with current magical events. Claudia was endlessly reading her copy, and had hectored Harry into buying one for himself. He read it a lot more than he did Hogwarts a History, another book he had finally bought.....though mostly to do research on his number two enemy: Albus Dumbledore. Claudia and Harry talked a lot about her History events, and Harry was already debating with himself on how to get into at least one of them for next year, when he would have more than a couple of votes on the organizing committee to back him.

Round one was a multiple choice exam that was graded on the fly magically. The test took the two hours before lunch, and only the top 15 advanced to the oral portion in the second and final round. One of Claudia's strengths was her ability to take tests well, and the first round did not depend on the percentage of correct answers, but the number of them. The parchments were charmed to keep asking questions for as long as the students kept answering them. So a contestant could quit after an hour, but lose a lot of ground to someone who plugged away for the entire round. Claudia finished with 12 more correct answers than John Geyser, her nearest challenger, and seemed poised and ready to take her first overall title.

In the Transfiguration event, the idea was to take a mess of wood, indeterminate powder, paper, and balls of rubber, and create a living room, having five minutes to do as much as possible to complete the task. This event was heavily biased toward the older students, and was also notable as the only true 'judged' event this year, though Charms events in earlier years had been judged as well. The judges, Professors Washburn and Palmer, and government lackey Bill Tuttle for the first round, only saw the creations after they were done, so that no personal biases could intrude. As this was a full field event, the competition area was split into thirds, using the largest classroom to do so, and three students at a time, chosen randomly from year to year, were in action.

Sophie, Warrick, and Jonas all made it easily into the finals, which included 18 competitors. Sophie wound up fifth in the round, with Warrick and Jonas placing ninth and tenth as well. The field was

considered a weak one, as it went head-to-head with the last and most popular Defense event, so no student could do both. So all three were guaranteed to score something for themselves and their Houses, with Sophie quietly creeping up on the top ten overall with this being her last event.

Over in the Reducto Challenge, the competition went so quickly that there were three rounds total, one in the morning and two in the afternoon. In the Reducto Challenge there were two challenges: a block of magically enhanced stone, weighing approximately 75 pounds and measuring about two feet in circumference, was placed in the center of the room, and the contestants had to destroy it to reveal the object inside of it.....which was charmed to not be harmed by the volley of curses hitting it. The object was set to glow when it was cleared sufficiently, and competitors were given points based on their times. The second part of the round was how much damage the contestant did on their very first casting of the curse. The ground area around the stone was charmed to record how much debris came down on the first salvo, no matter how quickly the second curse made contact with the stone. So speed and power were both integral here, and accuracy helped as well. This too was a full field event, and the students went one at a time, the first round scores not carrying over, though the second round scores did.

Think of a one-sided Western-style shootout when you muse on the Reducto Challenge.....at least that's what the younger years did. A few of them actually drew their wands from the hip and fired away. This made for quite the entertaining spectacle, and the twins provided an unofficial running commentary. Some highlights:

“Okay, so that little kid is expected to destroy a stone weighing more than she does?”

Five competitors later:

“For crying out loud lad, I could lick that stone and get to the center more quickly than you're doing!”

“Yeah, like that sucker.....what's it called Harry?”

“I have no idea. Drew?”

“A Tootsie-Roll Pop.”

“A what?”

“You heard me.”

“That’s a stupid name for a sucker. Americans.”

“And he’s still not finished yet!”

Ten minutes pass:

“That girl looks just like Ginny, I’m getting Burrow flashbacks.”

“Drew, do you lot have garden gnomes over here?”

“Sure, they live in the woods. None around here though, at least within walking distance. You getting the urge to throw one?”

“I can wait a few weeks. You’ll see them when you come over to the house.”

“I want to see that ghoul Harry was telling me about.”

“Leonidas? He’s a lot of fun, we’ve gotten a lot of inspiration from him over the years.”

“Yeah, old men like you.”

“Hey 19.”

Soon it was Nan Mahon’s turn, and both of them turned to Harry.

“That’s Nan Mahon?!” The girl in question turned to them and smiled, they had been a little loud with it.

It was quite a smile.

“You’ve been holding out on us mate.”

“I don’t know what you’re on about. She’s like my little sister, who just happens to look like a model.”

“Have you beaten her in chess yet?”

“Once, in muggle chess, and no you perverts, its not because I’ve been distracted.”

“I’m sure Occlumency helps.”

“It’s a bonus to be sure, all sorts of non-military applications for it.”

“If only we were younger.”

“Much younger.”

“She’s 14 in case you were wondering.”

“Okay, much, much younger.”

Eventually things got to the Juniors, and first up was Jake Bailey, who lived in the non-Harry/Warrick room. Jake hadn’t missed the cut for Advanced Defense by much, and was in the competition mainly because Reiko and Sophie had been needed for other things. He was a bit slow off the draw, and his first punch didn’t have a ton of punch in it, but his subsequent shots were all on target and he recorded the best time of the day so far, though his relatively poor first shot put him in third place overall, behind the two most talented Transition students in Defense: Anita Nall and Mike Stewart. These scores were soon topped by Basic Combat students Liesel Matthews and Amanda Knight, with Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams moving in just behind former leader Nall. Drew was next, he was the reigning champion in

this event, and had finished in the top ten for the two years before that.

He strode up to the firing line and waited for Ripley's signal to begin, wand facing the stone. He took a deep breath and nodded to Ripley that he was ready.

"Fire!"

"REDUCTO!"

The first blast dug a six inch pit right into the middle of the stone, and without waiting to see how much damage, he sent further curses directly to that spot, his wand not wavering a bit.

That was the problem with some of the younger competitors you see, they stopped after the first shot to see how much damage they did, thus hurting their overall time. Call it competitive rubbernecking. If pressed on the matter, Drew would admit to doing the same in his first crack at the event, during his Freshman year. Not this time though, as it took only seven shots to get to the center of the stone, which revealed the small metal sphere. The sphere meant nothing in and of itself, it was just easier to protect from all the curses that might hit it.

The seven shots needed were the fewest so far, with brief leader Liesel Matthews having needed 11, and had taken longer per shot to boot. Drew was the new leader, with only Harry and the 12 Seniors to come. He walked over to the sideline, slapping hands with Harry as he passed him.

"Good on you mate."

"Good luck dude."

Harry decided, for this first round and for amusement purposes, that he would show off his quick draw. He kept his wand sticking out of his jeans pocket, and nodded to Ripley that he was ready. The older man

raised his eyebrows as if to say 'are you sure about this son?'. Harry nodded again, and Ripley raised his hand.

“Fire!”

Harry's right hand flew in a blur and the curse soon was let loose at the stone.

“REDUCTO!”

No one could really tell how much damage the curse did, because Reducto's two through five came in stunningly quick succession. Only the fact that the sphere put up a magical barrier upon its reveal prevented more curses from sallying forth. Harry walked out of the firing area to silence for the most part, though there were mutterings amongst the other contestants.....the ones who had gone earlier mostly stayed to see if they made the next round, and to see Harry in action. He got to his friends, and Fred spoke for all of them.

“I think I just wet myself.”

That broke up George and Drew, as Harry's score was announced as the highest so far.

“That was really cool, too bad there aren't four rounds.”

“That was quite a show you both put on, now we have to at least sort of get close to it. Fred, they keep putting us in impossible situations don't they?”

“Right George, well nothing else to do but go.” George was now called, the first Senior having gone already and finishing 11th in the first round thus far. The twins were going early because they were not Basic Combat students, and those tended to be 'seeded' higher, going later in each year's round. Two years ago the idea of either twin doing well in this kind of thing would have been laughable, but a lot had happened since then, and both were realizing that taking certain things seriously had obvious benefits. This was one of them. Fred and George, without telling Harry, were planning on challenging Ron

and Hermione to a non-lethal Wizards' Duel.....just to see. They weren't worried about what he would think, or whether he would try to talk them out of it. They just wanted his surprised reaction to be genuine when they sprung the challenge on the lovebirds.

George needed ten shots to take down the stone, and his total score put him behind Harry, Drew, and Liesel Matthews. Fred needed the same number of shots in the same amount of time, but his first shot damage was a hair worse than his twin, so he was left to fifth place. No other Seniors cracked the top five, though they wound up filling spots eight through ten. The top 50 advanced through to the next round, the number cut after each round in each event was up to that particular event's show runners, the teacher or teachers who taught that subject.

After a quick lunch, it was back to the line for all our players. Claudia had the verbal portion of her contest to go, and she got really lucky at one point, as three questions in a row were asked of other competitors that she didn't know.....and all three of them got them wrong. She side-stepped disaster though, and walked away with the victory, after only an hour, with Cortez Quidditch Captain John Geyser hanging on for second place. Lyman walked up to Claudia and shook her hand heartily.

"Congratulations Claudia, that was a tour de force."

"Thanks Professor, I can't believe I got my first win!" She was smiling large, and Lyman knew that her boyfriend Lee would be hearing about it in excruciating detail come summer. Well he assumed it would be summer, not knowing it would be the next night in the trunk. Harry trusted Lyman more than any other 'adult' figure at Great Lakes, but even he had his limits.

"After muggle university, you'll be ready to take over from me here." Lyman was 43 years old, hardly a candidate for retirement.

"You're not going to be retiring in five years.....are you?"

“You’d better hurry up and graduate, I don’t know if I’ll last even that long.”

“What will you do with yourself?” Teachers didn’t make so good a money that they could retire before 50 did they?”

“Oh I’ll be a writer.” Isn’t that what they all say?

In Transfiguration, the second round took relatively little time, with the bottom of the final round not changing too much, places-wise, as scores did not carry over. Jonas went first of our three players, and he improved on his design by quite a bit, having used the morning round for some good practice. He basically tried to replicate his living room at home, and did a not half bad job of it. His score put him in the lead, so he was assured of a top ten finish for the event. Warrick likewise built upon his earlier performance, he was really coming into his own in this subject. Harry probably wouldn’t need to tank anything to get his roommate into Advanced Transfiguration come fall. His score not only held up his place from the morning, he and Jonas would both advance one spot.

Sophie, as was her wont, spent the first minute slowly building up her furniture, before going on a building frenzy that all but wiped her out magically at the end. To Warrick and Jonas’ silent laughter, she too did the Steele living room.....not really remembering too much detail about her own back in Springfield, and even Jonas had to admit that she did it a lot better than he did. She held up her place, and advanced three spots before the first round leader took the floor: Jack Straw.

To say that he blitzed them all was an understatement. This kind of thing was the specialty for the number one ranked Transfiguration student in the Junior Year, and he did not disappoint. He did the opposite of Sophie, and built the bulk of his room in the first three minutes, using the last two to put little touches on things. He easily took the highest score, and his third victory of the week, his Olympics marred only by a fourth place finish in the Thursday Charms Air Apparent competition. Sophie would wind up second, with Warrick

and Jonas finishing eighth and ninth. They were the only four non-Seniors to place, as the Senior class went three-seven, and tenth.

Straw knew exactly who his competition for the overall title was, and was friendly enough with the gang to suggest something to them.

“You think we have time to see the end of the Reducto Challenge?” Heads nodded all around, and the six of them, Ray Elwood had finished one spot out of the top ten, raced over to the Defense room.

Flashback 90 minutes to Defense:

The second round went off pretty much without a hitch, as the older years dominated the final 24 places. This was not an event where luck was a big part of things, only nerves could interfere with the ordering. All in all, Juniors and Seniors made up 22 of the 24 spots in the finals, with only Anita Nall and Mike Stewart, both Cortez Transitions, spoiling a sweep. George and Fred led the Senior brigade, keeping their spots of four and five, though both of them got closer to still third place Liesel Matthews. Harry and Drew virtually matched their scores from the first round, and were far ahead of Matthews and the twins. These scores carried over though, and a 30 minute rest period was given.

The rest of the gang got there about 10 minutes after Claudia, and were soon apprised that nothing much had changed from the morning. They weren't the only ones arriving though, what seemed like most of the school showed up for the finals to see Harry duke it out with Drew, figuratively.

The last round was like an enclosed Quidditch or Quodpot game, with the competitors striding out to the cheers of their House. Ed Lattimore got himself into the top ten with an outstanding final round, and Jake Bailey moved in there as well, just ahead of Lattimore into ninth. That assured Cortez of half the top ten spots, and with only three events this day, they would be primed to move closer to Jefferson for the House title.

Fred went, and using all his focus and concentration, managed to do more damage on his initial Reducto than ever before, even if his time

remained the same. George did not do quite as well, and slipped behind his brother into second, with three to go. The twins were now tied in overall points as well, the obstacle course would decided things for their bet. They were badly hoping for Liesel Matthews to falter, and she did.....just not enough. Her final round score was just high enough to keep her lead over both twins. Drew then strode out to the roars of the Jefferson students, as well as the rest of the gang.

He didn't let them down, and recorded his best score yet, getting to the sphere in only five shots, and fired more quickly on the average than his six shooter in the second round. This was better than he had done the year before, when he nosed out Ryan Chappelle for the overall title in this event. Harry had done five shots as well in the second round, so he knew that he had to at least match that in order to take the title.

Harry walked out there to complete quiet, these people did not want to miss a thing. At Ripley's signal his wand, already out, spit out the five curses needed so quickly that they were almost impossible to count. The magical energy flowed through his body and came out of his wand to perfection.

Well not out of HIS wand.....He was using Tom Riddle's wand for this event. There was literally no difference. The wand may choose the Wizard, but as Neville and Draco, both on second wands, could attest, there wasn't just one wand to rule them all.

No one could tell and of this obviously, and the crowd would only know it was five Reducto curses because Harry told them. He shot so fast that the third curse was coming out of his wand before the first even hit the stone.

Drew just smiled and shook his head, and then walked over and raised Harry's arm in victory. Drew Baylor had gone out to defend his title, and had improved on his victorious performance noticeably from the year before, only to finish second this time. If anyone in Great Lakes had a right to be bitter toward Harry for showing up and stealing any thunder, it was this young man. But his arm was the one raising Harry's.

The gang had done the Flying Challenge one better in this event, going 1-2-4-5. There would be more secession talk at dinner, this time not as loudly.

Day Five Champions:

Harry Potter, Junior, Cortez House, Reducto Challenge

Claudia Cregg, Junior, Shawnee House, History By The Book

Jack Straw, Junior, Proctor House, Transfiguration Build Upon

Gang Standings after three events, four for Sophie:

Harry: 72 points, three first place finishes overall

Claudia: 65 points, one first, one second, one third

Sophie: 65 points, one second, two thirds, one seventh.....her final score.

Drew: 60 points, one first, two seconds

Reiko: 49 points, one first, one third, one tenth

Fred: 47 points, one fourth, two fifths

George: 47 points, one fourth, two fifths

Jonas: 35 points, one third, one fifth, one ninth

Warrick: 12 points, one eighth, two other class placing events

The battle for first overall seemed to be down to Harry, Claudia, and Jack Straw, all Juniors. Straw was finished, with three firsts and a fourth, for a total of 86 points, ensuring him of a top-three overall score. He needed Harry to finish with 14 or fewer points in the obstacle course to win the overall, with Claudia needing to win and have Harry finish with eight fewer points. That said, Claudia was not considered likely to do well in the obstacle course, the only event left

in the program. Drew could only finish second, and would need a poor performance from Harry to do even that well. He was looking down the barrel at third place again, with Jack taking strong advantage of events where he had no real competition, at least from the other contenders. He faced Drew in only one event, and Harry and Claudia in none. That meant that any points tie for the overall would literally be a tie, unless it was Harry and Claudia. as head-to-head was the tiebreaker in these kinds of things.

After the standings were posted, there was some grumbling from the bottom part of the top ten overall about the fact that Claudia was in third place without having had to touch her wand all week. That was the interesting part of the Olympics, there were more non-wand events than ones that required them. Joe Clancy was doing much the same thing, and had finished second in each of the Potions events, also guaranteeing himself a healthy final total. Each year there were contenders like that, and there was always debate amongst the Seniors on whether to require at least one wand event for those hoping to win the overall title, but it always failed. The obstacle course the next day would be one round, with students going in reverse order of their overall points, so Claudia would know where she stood as soon as she left, as would Harry and Jack Straw. Mathematically, those were the only three students with chances to win.

The standings after Day Five:

Cortez: 390 points 2679 points for the week

Jefferson: 372 points 2809 points for the week

Shawnee: 310 points 2135 points for the week

Proctor: 296 points 2172 points for the week

Cortez again edged Jefferson for the day, but it was unlikely to take the overall lead with only one points event left. There were 456 points available in a full field event, and no House could get more than half of them, even if they swept every year, since there were only three students per House per year. Proctor was still holding off Shawnee

for third place, though its top scorer was finished, while Shawnee still had some solid competitors to come on Saturday.

Saturday, May 17, 1997

10:00 am

Dining Hall

The Dining Hall was the meeting place for the 84 contestants in the final event, the obstacle course. The lower case letters are not a typo, that's how they spelled it: little letters for a big event. It was considered to be the decathlon of Defense, and that was the reason it was the only event on its day. There was just the one round, which took something over seven hours to get through, and the competition took place in the stadium. The course laid out was the same for everyone, and the competitors were not allowed to see it beforehand, hence the waiting in the Dining Hall. All of them, but the first three to go, had to be there at 10:00 am sharp, even Drew, Claudia, and Harry, the last three, who would not be doing their turn until after 5:00 pm. Every 15 minutes or so, three of them left with one of the faculty for the walk over to the stadium, and no one was allowed to leave, or come back once they competed. Food was served in box lunches in the stadium for the spectators, or in the Hall itself for any hungry competitors.

The kids all set up shop at various tables, with the entire gang together at a big one, minus Sophie. Sophie was sitting with her roommates in the stadium, and also sitting with Marie Ford.....who had been included in more and more things the last few days with them, though she had gotten no where near the trunk. Drew, sensing that he needed to fill the hours, looked over at the others.

“So, when is my first date with Marie?” They all stared back at him, most waiting for Reiko to say something, this being her idea and all.

“When do you want it to be Drew?”

“Well I assumed that you all had some master plan, like with Claudia and Lee.” A few uncomfortable laughs ensued, and Reiko continued.

“Well not really, I kind of sprung it on everyone the same time I did you. What do you think of her?” He had another question first.

“Just out of curiosity, if I do say no, am I going to get more trial balloons like this?” He didn’t sound mad at all, just bemused kind of.

“Well that depends on you, no one is going to force anything down your throat.” Drew started chuckling.

“That’s good to hear. Now how are we going to do anything without getting her into the trunk? The Flackter trips are done, and I’m assuming she’s not coming to Wales with us.” There had been two Flackter Alley trips during the calendar year so far, none of them yielding any stories or drama worth repeating. Everyone looked to Harry with that, anything trunk related was his bailiwick.

“She can come into the trunk no problem, it’s the floo that I have a problem with showing to any outsiders.” One reason he had tried so hard to interest Lee in Claudia, that way everything would be kept in the family. Jonas had told Harry that he wouldn’t be getting an actual relationship style girlfriend anytime soon, so not to worry about him. The only worry now was Drew, whom everyone wanted to couple up with someone.....if only because they were teenagers and that’s what teenagers do.

“Well I’ll give it a shot then, she seems nice.” There were smiles all around at hearing that, as Warrick’s name was now called. He was relatively low in points, though he had done pretty well in this event the year before, placing sixth in Transition, his best showing. His athleticism carried him through quite efficiently. They all got up with him.

“Good luck mate.”

“Take it home Warrick.”

“Do me proud boyfriend.” Guess who that was, as Reiko hugged him fiercely and gave him a kiss for luck. He left, a bit nervously, and the others sat back down. It would be awhile before Jonas would be called, he was next lowest in points.

It turned out to be three hours, as there were a lot of students with point totals between Warrick’s 12 and Jonas’ 35. They had finished lunch an hour before when he was called, as Harry was sorely tempted to call in Dobby, if only to see how Warrick had done. That was not allowed though, as Murray had made a special point of asking him not to do anything of the kind. Nothing could be seen as cheating or favoritism, and Dobby was the most identifiable elf in Great Lakes history, most of the students having only met Raffles at their orientations. When he was alive that is.

Fred and George took off 90 minutes later, having each taken a nice nap in the interim. Reiko left in the next group. The room was getting less and less crowded, as Ziegler came over after awhile and started shooting the shit with Harry, Drew, and Claudia. The teachers rotated in and out on this duty, and all Ziegler would tell them is that no students had been injured as of yet. He was not the first teacher to come over like this, as Harry and Claudia were both known for just walking up to their teachers and chatting with them. It wasn’t sucking up, they just happened to like their teachers, and wanted good conversation, and it wasn’t unheard of to see a teacher sitting with the gang at a meal, not counting the regular Sunday breakfasts with Harry, Claudia, and Josh Lyman.

At 4:45 pm, it was just the three of them left, and Lyman came to get them.

“All right you three, let’s get a move on. Reiko’s going right now, and there are four in between her and Drew here.” They walked out with Lyman and Ziegler, and made nervous conversation all the way over to the stadium. There was no announcer, and they only had the crowd cheering to go on. They were led to a small trailer, like one on a movie set, and brought inside, where Heyman was waiting. There were no windows, and the trailer was soundproofed, so that they

couldn't hear anything. He confirmed what Ziegler said, that there had been no injuries so far, and that there just four left. Senior Jennifer Keller, Claudia's vanquisher in the first History event, was in fourth place among the competitors in this event, though she had no chance at the overall title. She was called after about two minutes, and there was more waiting. Then Drew left, five minutes later, Claudia.

Harry was now alone with Heyman, and the other man looked at him curiously.

"Nervous Harry?"

"A bit sir, I mean I've seen previous year's courses via pensieve, but there's nothing like the real thing."

"You have a pensieve?"

"Yes sir, I bought it last Fall. Very handy."

"Yes it is, I got my first one for graduation."

"Here, or muggle university?"

"Oh sorry, university. I got a car for my graduation here." Harry was much looking forward to his first car shopping, to take place in a little over a year.

"Where did you go to university?"

"Michigan State, down in East Lansing. Where are you and the others thinking of going?"

"Well right now the number one favorite is The University of Virginia, with Tulane being right there too. It all depends on the SAT's and where we can get in with them." Those scores were due any day now, and in fact Harry was wearing a Tulane sweatshirt that Dobby had somehow obtained for him. They continued to chit-chat about colleges until Harry was called. He liked the idle chatter actually, it got

his mind off what he was about to do, and Heyman had some good tips. Soon there was a knock on the door, and it was Ripley.

“Harry, we’re ready for you.” He followed Ripley into the stadium, where he saw the course for the first time. He didn’t see Claudia anywhere around, but could spot the rest of the gang all sitting together in one section. Ripley stood next to him and quietly explained the rules.

“Okay Harry, here it is. The course is a loop, and you’ll wind up back here. You have to get past each of the eight obstacles with either magic, cleverness, or both. You can only use your own wand, but you can fight wandlessly if want to as well. You just have your one wand right?” He looked Harry over, and the lad was only wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, he didn’t seem to have another wand stashed on his person.

“Yes sir, I didn’t think I’d be allowed to use the other one.”

“You thought right. You can use any spells or curses that aren’t Dark, and each obstacle has to be dealt with, not run around. Any questions?” Harry couldn’t think of any.

“No sir.”

“Good luck. The timer will begin when you cross the starting line.” Said line was a chalk line right in front of him. Harry took a couple of deep breaths, snagged a glimpse of Sophie in the crowd, and bolted across the line.

First up, and the irony was hilarious, a WWW swamp. Fred and George had both been made to promise, upon their Ripley spiel at the starting line, that they would not use the deactivation spell for it, and that Harry did not know it himself. He didn’t either, the twins were actually telling the truth. Most students had blasted their way through the swamp with some kind of explosion spell, or iced it over and skated across. Harry replicated his Feather Light/Wind Charm cocktail from the September mass duel, and floated over. He put a lot of power into the wind spell, and got across faster than anyone

besides the twins, who had each used a funky magnetizing spell and had themselves pulled across that way, cleaning themselves off on the way to the next obstacle.

They hadn't known officially about the swamps ahead of time, but at the beginning of April had gotten an order from the government for an extra 100 of them. Two and two usually makes four, and they prepared accordingly.

Next up was a 15 foot high wall, with a rope dangling down from it. The rope was six feet off the ground, and most students had to jump for it. Harry aimed his wand and his left hand at the wall.

“ABRUMPERE!”

The combined Explosion Spell took care of the wall nicely. He was back far enough that the debris didn't get him, and there wasn't much left of the wall anymore. Drew, the twins, and three others had taken this strategy, while the other 77 had shimmied over. Harry hurdled a couple of big pieces of rock and got to the third obstacle. It was Greenleaf, hidden behind a rubber mask, firing only Rictusempra at him wandlessly, using his wand to conjure up a decent sized shield. He, Ripley, and Murray had alternated this duty all day, the only teachers to take active part in the Olympics, in that they affected the outcome.

Harry wasted no time with whomever this was, he aimed his wand at the ground right in front of the masked man's feet.

“Fortier Zacundera!”

The ground where it hit rippled with the force of a small earthquake, in an area five feet square. Ripley was off his feet in a heartbeat, and Harry aimed his hand as soon as he saw it.

“Mobilicorpus!”

He threw Greenleaf 10 feet to the side, though not high enough in the air that he was hurt upon reconnection to the ground. The crowd, which had been cheering loudly anyway, went nuts when they saw this. This third obstacle had tripped a lot people up, even though the teacher never fired anything other than Tickling Charms.

Obstacle four happened to be two magically created snakes slithering around. Harry slowed down his run, and instinctively yelled out:

“Get out of my way!” In Parseltongue. There were magical microphones all over the field so that the crowd could hear the action better, and Harry speaking snake language startled more than a couple of them. Harry fully expected the snakes to move aside just as he had ordered.

Didn't work though, the serpents were charmed to be deaf. Ripley and Greenleaf, the architects of the course, had thought about Harry when adding this obstacle. Harry almost ran into the snakes, he was so surprised, and barely had time to raise wand and hand at the snakes:

“REPULSAR!”

The snakes were so close that they were easily punted aside by the Pulse Spell, and Harry ran right through the middle. He assumed, correctly as it turned out, that Ripley or Greenleaf would stop him if he hadn't sufficiently dealt with the obstacle, and went on to the next one, approaching the far end of the field from where he started.

All of this had taken 1:32, the fastest time by six seconds, Drew had gone 1:38, with Fred and George a second behind that.

Obstacle five was as a mass of floating spikes about 20 feet from end to end. They were metal, floating from one foot off the ground to 10 feet above that. Harry thought, after slowing to a walk, that the solution to this obstacle was obvious, so he loosed a curse right into the middle:

“ABRUMPERE!”

The metal spikes were so loaded with charms that the explosion spell barely did any damage to them, though there were burn marks on the spikes that were hit, more damage than anyone else had done with their first shot. He next tried to Transfigure the nearest one into paper.

“COMMUTATUS!”

That too didn't work, and Harry was getting a little frustrated. He decided that if he couldn't get through them, and wasn't allowed to go around them, he would take the road not traveled.

He went under them.

Harry blasted a path right beneath the highest of the spikes, the teachers having not charmed the turf underneath. He didn't have time to go more than six inches with his 'tunnel', but that was enough, as he quickly crawled under them and made the soft turn to run back to the starting line. It was 30 meters before he got to the next one, and he was getting a little winded by now.

The sixth obstacle was a magical barrier that just lightly shimmered in the near darkness. Harry only saw it because the stadium lights, which had been turned on a couple of hours earlier, hit it just right.

This time Abrumpere worked quite well, though it took both Harry's wand and his left hand to get through on one salvo. Most students had needed at least two shots, and almost 2/3 had needed to come to a complete stop. Harry kept going as fast he could, patting himself on the back for his time on the treadmill during his Winter Quidditch workouts. Another 35 meters to sprint.

Obstacle seven was a gray mist that was 10 feet in the air and an equal amount wide, and Harry wasn't fool enough to run into it, sensing trouble. A wind spell didn't do much other than make the mist swirl more rapidly, though he figured it had been worth a try. He next conjured up a Quaffle and threw it in, just to see what the mist did.

It was like a hurricane, buffeting the ball around for 10 seconds before spitting it back out. It wasn't the Pink but the next best thing, and Harry wanted no part of it. Just for the hell of it, he shouted:

“Finite Incantatem!”

And wouldn't you know, that did the trick. It was an obstacle of cleverness, not power. Harry shook his head for second, and sprinted on toward the eighth and final obstacle, one that was not visible to the naked eye.

This one was upon him before he even realized it, as he tripped off a booby trap, and dropped down into a 10 foot deep hole. The bottom was cushioned with a rebounding spell that launched him three feet back into the air, and a quick thinking Harry whipped his wand down toward the ground and put as much as power as he could on such short notice:

“FORTIER ZACUNDERA!”

The spell impacted the rubber mat at the bottom and set off a pulse ripple that shot Harry out of the pit like a cannon. As he reached his apex in the air, he then pointed his wand at his stomach and made sure his back was to the finish line.

“Blugarda!”

The most powerful Banishing style charm that he could come up with, and it stopped his downward descent, and punted him 20 meters down the field and he landed right before the finish line and bounced over, painfully. The crowd, which had quieted down a bit in awe after seeing him fly out of the pit so quickly, started roaring again. Dr. Carter, showing remarkable foresight, had handed out boxes of sore throat lozenges to all the spectators, and they were getting a lot of use, especially to those who had been in the stands the entire duration.

Harry had landed hard on his left hip, but he bounced right up on pure adrenaline. He looked over at Ripley, who had put his wand to his throat.

“Harry Potter finishes with a time of 3:03.34, and he wins the competition!” Harry slumped to his knees, as the adrenaline wore off a bit, but there was a huge grin on his face as his professor came up to him, wand off his throat. He shook Harry’s hand.

“That was extraordinary Harry, very well done.”

“Thank you sir.”

Wand back up, Ripley announced the top five scores:

Harry Potter, 3.03.34 first place overall and in Junior Year, 24 points

Drew Baylor, 3.09.33 second place overall and in Junior Year, 18 points

Fred Weasley, 3.10.56 third overall and first in Senior Year, 20 points

George Weasley, 3:12.79 fourth overall and second in Senior Year, 16 points

Jennifer Keller, 3:12.98 fifth overall and third in Senior Year, 14 points

Other gang members:

Reiko Aylesworth, 3:21.43, tenth overall and third in Junior Year, 9 points

Claudia Cregg, 3:30.30, 21st overall, and tenth in Junior Year, 1 point

Jonas Steele, 3:34.49, 28th overall, and 12th in Junior Year, 0 points

Warrick Forrester, 3:40.42, 42nd overall, and 20th in Junior Year, 0 points

“Let’s give a round of applause to your overall champion this year, with a perfect score of 96 points: Harry Potter!” A roar went up from the crowd, as Harry got to his feet again and waved to them, somewhat awkwardly. The gang came down from the stands, and put Harry up on their shoulders, parading him around the field. That was fun for a moment, but he was bruised up a bit, and soon asked to be put back down.

“Ahhh, watch the left hip, that’s where I landed at the finish line!” They got him down to the ground, and he was quickly enveloped into a fierce hug by Sophie. She shouted in his ear.

“That was amazing Harry, only four others came within 10 seconds of you!” That would be Drew, the twins, and Keller. Sixth place Ray Elwood had finished at 3:14.87.

“Get ready for some pensieve time there darling, I’m going to want to see all of them go.”

“Anything for the hero of the hour Mister.” Harry grimaced at the ‘hero’ part, no one should be labeled a hero for winning a competition, athletic or otherwise. He didn’t say this though, not wanting to rain on the moment for her. She took his expression as one of pain from his bruised hip. Murray was walking up to him now, a large smile on her face, with her was a short brunette that Harry had never seen before.

“Congratulations Harry, you put on quite a show this week.”

“Thank you ma’am, that was quite a course you folks laid out.”

“You went through it like butter. We’ll do the trophy presentations at dinner, as soon as everyone can get over there.” Harry just now noticed something.

“I’m starving suddenly.”

“You worked up quite an appetite. Harry, this is Michelle Ganoff, last year’s overall champion. She’ll be giving you your trophy.” Ganoff had

taken the portkey ride over from The Sorbonne, where she had just finished up her first year and was doing summer tutorials.

“Nice to meet you Michelle.”

“Likewise Harry, very impressive out there today.” Ganoff’s events had been Arithmancy and Ancient Runes the year before, sweeping both pairs of events. The two women moved on, and the gang slowly walked out of the stadium, with Harry being hailed with congratulations. Harry and the twins talked about the swamps and how they had gotten through them, no one else using the two strategies. The others told their own stories about their turns, Warrick admitting that he would have done much better, except that the mist grabbed him, costing him 10 crucial seconds that likely would have allowed him to defeat Claudia and Jonas, and gain some points.

Dinner was interrupted in the middle, for the presentation of the trophies:

The final standings:

Jefferson: 2929 points

Cortez: 2830 points

Shawnee: 2255 points

Proctor: 2237 points

Jefferson won for the sixth year in a row, with Proctor bringing up the rear for the fourth year in succession, and the seventh out of the last was very pleased though, with the overall champion in Harry, and Reiko coming back strong for the next year. Fred, George, and Harry had made a huge difference in terms of points, without them they still would have been second, just a distant, distant second. Though it should be said that Ryan Chappelle and Arthur Hailey would have taken their pounds of flesh in the points as well, benefiting Jefferson in what would have been their final Olympics.

The overall Top Ten, and Individual Year Champions:

Harry Potter, Junior, Cortez, 96 points

Jack Straw, Junior, Proctor, 86 points

Drew Baylor, Junior, Jefferson, 78 points

Jennifer Keller, Senior, Jefferson, 72 points

Jim Bouton, Senior, Jefferson, 70 points

Fred Weasley, Senior, Cortez, 67 points

Claudia Cregg, Junior, Shawnee, 66 points

Sophie Weir, Junior, Cortez, 65 points

Jodie Kramer, Senior, Jefferson, 64 points

George Weasley, Senior, Cortez, 63 points

The rest of the gang:

Reiko Aylesworth, Cortez, 57 points, 13th overall, 6th in Junior Year

Jonas Steele, Junior, Jefferson, 35 points; 44th overall, 13th in Junior Year

Warrick Forrester, Junior, Cortez, 12 points, 84th overall, 22nd in Junior Year

The Year Champions:

Jennifer Keller, Jefferson, Senior Champion

Harry Potter, Cortez, Junior Champion

Jeff McMahon, Cortez, Transition Champion

Wang Zhi-Yan, Jefferson, Apprentice Champion

Huey Freeman, Jefferson, Sophomore Champion

Riley Freeman, Jefferson, Freshman Champion

Karen Yeo, Shawnee, Novice Champion

Huey and Riley Freeman were brothers from Chicago, who had a Ron/Ginny dynamic to their relationship, though heaven help anyone who tried to take one of them on if the other was near. Wang's nickname was Paddy, as he had been adopted by Irish immigrants and had something of a brogue himself. McMahon had finished 12th overall, the highest finish outside the two eldest years, though nowhere near Drew's performance from the year before. Each Individual Year Champion received a perfect score on the upcoming test of their choice as their reward, and final exams were eligible.

It was interesting to note that without Harry blocking him in two events, Drew would have finished in a tie with Jack Straw for the overall points lead, and won on the head-to-head tiebreaker, having beaten him in the Charms Air Apparent event. If he ever thought it through to that degree, he never said anything, and he was more than gracious to his good friend. Fred won five galleons off his brother, with the sole difference being one place, in the last event. Reiko finished in the same overall spot as last year, and vowed privately to compete in only her best events the next year, to hopefully give Harry, Drew, and Jack a run for their money.

There was a huge party in the trunk that night, with Lee, Bill, and Fleur all coming over from Britain in the middle of their night. The festivities last all evening, with Dobby and Winky having baked and cooked their brains out. Marie Ford was introduced to the trunk, and she and Drew spent quite a bit of time together, she having figured out what the deal was as well, and not minding it a bit. It helped that she had sat next to Sophie for over seven hours in the stadium, quite long enough to get the lowdown on Drew.

Afterwards, as they got ready for bed and Harry's real reward, Sophie looked at him.

“You know, no one has ever won the overall two years in a row.” Harry had wondered about that, the only event that he hadn’t dominated was the Flying Challenge, and the soon-to-be graduating Jim Bouton wouldn’t be there to scare him again. He smiled at his girlfriend and brought her close.

“I’m just going to savor this one for awhile Sophie. This was a good week.”

End Chapter

Author’s Note II: Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to everyone.

Author's Note: Once things go back to Britain, as they will be at some point in this chapter and all of the next one, at least, the times will be back to GMT. Also, the SAT's come up again in this chapter, and even looking at the Wikipedia I can't make any sense of the scores. I took them eight years before our players did, and we're just going to go with the scoring system from then: Written and Verbal, each having 800 points possible. Whether or not that was the system in 1997, well remember that this is a fantasy story.

Sunday, May 25, 1997

Noon

Harry's trunk, in Casa de Fred and George, Great Lakes version

Dobby came in the with the mail from Britain. There was a letter for the twins from their parents, a letter meant for all three of them from Charlie in Romania, and one for Harry from Hermione. Sophie had just gotten out of the shower when Dobby came back. No, Dobby didn't see anything a self-respecting elf shouldn't, but all the same he gave Harry the letter and went upstairs to finish his route.

Dear Harry,

How are you doing this afternoon? It is afternoon there right? Its going pretty well here. The end of term examinations are in a month, and Ron and I are starting to really get cracking at our studying. Ginny is hip deep in OWL preparation, otherwise she would have a letter for you herself, but she's getting a little stressed out about them, I hear her muttering to herself more and more lately. Was I like that? I can't remember, and Ron won't tell me. Speaking of him, Ron says hello, and he doesn't say it sarcastically. He said to tell you good luck on your last Quidditch game, and his brothers too.

Well he didn't say that about Fred and George, I'm saying it for him.

We read all about your Olympic victory over there, the article in The Daily Prophet was very detailed. And the twins both finishing in the top ten? Ginny won some money from Ron on that one, I won't say how much. Well I won't say because he won't tell me exactly, so it

must have been a lot. The competition sounds fascinating, if I get to be Head Girl I'm going to nag Dumbledore to allow us to have one here. I'm pretty confident of being named, as long as they go by grades and OWL scores. Padma Patil's grades are going down, she's dating some seventh year boy and they spend every waking hour together. Hannah Abbott is a nice girl and all, but I just can't see her as Head Girl. And Pansy Parkinson.....well even Professor Shepherd can't hide his contempt for her. Her and Professor McGonagall that is, he gets his digs in at her all the time in class. He really is a great teacher though, whatever his respect for authority. He's in the Flitwick/Sprout/Hagrid category of friendliness.

Harry, the main reason I'm writing, besides wanting to see how you are doing of course, is that I would like to accept your offer to live at Godric's Hollow and do some training with your American friends. They all seemed very nice back at The Burrow, and I would be interested to get to know them better. I've asked my parents and they have given the okay, they were very taken with you, especially given that we are just friends. I don't know what Ron is going to do about July yet, and I doubt he does either. I'm only speaking for me here. Mrs. Weasley sent me an owl saying that you've promised to look out for Ron if he comes, and I'm very grateful for that Harry. I can promise you that if he does come, he won't try anything foolish in regards to you. He told me that flat out Harry, he knows it would be suicide. You also have my guarantee on that, I'll stand surety for Ron.

Oh, Remus mentioned that he would be available for 'the talk' whenever you want him to be. I'm not sure what that means, but I promised him I would mention it to you. I hope you don't mind, I've been borrowing his copy of the American newspaper you got him for Christmas, it's fascinating to read a non-biased version of Magical news.

Let me know the logistics of Godric's Hollow, our school year ends the same day yours does, or so says the calendar. They're ending early this year for some reason, perhaps Dumbledore has issues to deal with this summer. We were just told about it last week. Very odd. But that means that we can all go there together, I'm really looking forward to this.

Talk to you soon,

Love,

Hermione.

Harry had read the letter aloud to Sophie as she was getting dressed. He leaned back on the couch.

“Well what do you think Sophie?”

“Well you know her a lot better than I do. Do you regret inviting her now?”

“No, it’ll be a good test if nothing else. Ron will accept at the last minute, so that’s nothing to worry about.”

“You think he will? Why?”

“He would go crazy wondering what we’re all up to, and if Hermione is being too friendly with any of us. Me especially.”

“Good thing Jonas isn’t interested in her.” Jonas had spoken to Hermione for a little bit at The Burrow, and had been bored to tears inside a minute.

“Well he might make an exception if it pisses Ron off enough.” That was certainly true, but Sophie wanted to come back to something Harry had mentioned just now.

“What did you mean before about testing Hermione?”

“I’m curious as to her attitude around me, because of Ron. There’s a push and pull there, it can’t be good for her.”

“But you’re not doing any pulling are you?”

“ Well with the school offer, and now this, added to The Burrow.....well it seems like every time I show up, I’m yanking on Hermione’s loyalties. I can only imagine the carnage if I had stuck around for the school year over there. Poor Molly and Arthur, they would have one son dead and another living in St. Mungos.”

“At least you won’t have that possibility now, he said wouldn’t try anything.” Harry started cackling as he headed for the shower, shucking clothes off as he went.

“He only said that to keep her quiet and to make himself look good. If he shows up there, something will go down, mark my words.”

“Don’t I always?” He threw his shirt over her head.

“Everyone is a comedian.”

“That’s comedienne, I’m a girl you know.”

“Trust me Sophie, I’ve noticed.”

Harry would write back to Hermione later on that day, for Dobby delivery on Monday. He reiterated that Ron was welcome if he chose to come, but that he would have to make his decision at least a week before the trial, so that they could figure out rooms for everyone and make up shower schedules. That was a lot of people for just three bathrooms.

Friday, May 30, 1997

Charms Classroom B

3:55 pm

“All right you guys, you’re out of here. Have a good weekend, study hard.” With that, Maloney dismissed her students for the week. Harry lingered behind for a moment.

“I’ll catch up guys, there are some things I want to talk to the Professor about, stuff we can use in summer workouts.” To his total and complete astonishment, that line of bull crap worked, and Sophie and company left the classroom chatting away, as they normally did. Harry made sure that the door was shut and locked, and turned to Janel Maloney.

“So are you ready Harry?”

“The moment I’ve been waiting for.”

“I’m sure a lot people would pay to see what’s about to happen.”

“Maybe we should have let people watch, and charged for it, we could make some money.”

“Ever the businessman aren’t you?”

“It never hurts to plan ahead on these types of things.”

“You know, anyone listening to this conversation might think we were planning something illicit and naughty.”

“I would be the envy of every classmate Professor, if that were the case, male or female.”

“Oh really?”

“You better believe it, but I don’t want to make Josh jealous with such rumors.” Maloney got the same mischievous look on her face that she always got when Harry ragged on her about Lyman.

“Don’t start Harry.” All the while this byplay was going on, Maloney had been lining the floor various objects. It was Harry’s private chance at The Air Apparent challenge from the Olympics.

“Now Reiko was over six minutes with six and seven objects in the final round, while Drew did five minutes with eight objects. These on

the floor are exactly the spread that they had to chose from, so you'll get a pretty accurate reading. Ready?"

"Yes ma'am, on three." He took a deep breath, and got his focus on as she counted down:

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

Harry immediately got two objects into the air, a baseball and a broken computer monitor. He silently counted again to ten, and lifted a tennis ball, then a child's wagon. Another pause as his magic got used to the way of things, then he pulled a pillow into the air, followed by a giant encyclopedia. This was six, and he wanted to match Drew's number and Reiko's time. He quickly got a medium size bookcase going, followed by a tire. Now he had eight objects in the air, and in 50 seconds time, 20 seconds less than Drew had needed. Now all he had to do was hold them up.

It was taking all of his concentration, and later on he would be very grateful that there wasn't a crowd of people watching. He had them all at least two feet in the air, with the baseball and tennis ball being over four feet up. Maloney only started calling the minutes after three:

"Three minutes Harry."

The strain was starting to show on his face, but he kept them all aloft, with dips only on the baseball and computer monitor.

"Four minutes." The eight objects were starting to lower almost imperceptibly, but not at any kind of fast rate.

"Five minutes." Now they were going down, as Harry passed Drew's time of 5:09.76, but the objects starting drop at rates of at least an inch per second. He held on as long as he could, but just before Maloney was about to call six minutes, the second to the last object,

the tennis ball, hit the ground, ending the show. He slumped to the ground, exhausted, as Maloney checked her stopwatch.

“That was a time of 5:58.45 Harry, let me check the hub for the points total.” The hub was the baseball, as it was in the Olympics as well, and Harry had known to make it one of the eight.

“You scored 544 points Harry, I can’t remember a score beating that since I’ve been here.”

“What was your highest? You must have done this event a time or two.”

“Not in my last two years, I did other events for some reason. My Transition score was 401, I think it got me fifth place if I remember correctly.”

“That’s pretty good for a Transition student. Dobby!” The wee fellow popped in.

“Yes Harry?”

“Please get me a small vial of Pepper-Up Potion if you could.”

“Right.” He was there and back in about 20 seconds. Harry drained the vial, and Maloney could tell its effects immediately.

“You keep that stuff in stock?”

“The twins do, back in the shop. I don’t use it that often, so it does have more of an impact on me than it does them. I just drink a lot of Dr. Pepper, that keeps me pepped up.”

“You and your Dr. Pepper, you should get an endorsement deal with them or something. Maybe you can get some free supplies of it that way.” A look washed over Harry’s face.

“You think so? I wonder if there are any magicals running the company. I’m going to have to investigate this.” Maloney had been kidding, but she saw that he was going to take the ball and run with it.

“Well just remember who gave you the idea.”

“I will ma’am. I should get going though, they’re going to wonder what I’m doing.”

“You don’t want to tell them what your score was?”

“If I hadn’t beaten their scores, sure I would tell them. But since I did.....well it would seem like bragging, and I don’t like that.” In the back of his mind, Harry always feared another Ron situation, though Warrick in particular had told him that Harry’s power and ability was nothing but a good thing as far as he was concerned.

“You hardly ever brag, we on the faculty marvel at that.”

“All that does is cause trouble, and I have enough problems without adding that to it.”

“Words to live by.”

“I’m the oldest teenager I’ve ever met.” They shared a laugh, and Harry went back up to Cortez.

Sunday, June 1, 1997

Defense Classroom A

3:00 pm

This was a special weekend class, with both Basic Combat groups in one. Ripley had been debating for months on when to have this, but felt that it was only fair for the Seniors to see Harry do more than play Quidditch before they took him on in a Defense related matter. He had announced this special class the week before, though not the nature of it. That mystery lasted about 20 minutes after the Juniors

were told, when Liesel Matthews shared the information with her boyfriend Jim Bouton, who was in the Senior Basic Combat class. He told her of the same news he had gotten, and it was spread around inside the next 10 minutes. There was mass speculation about the format and whether it might conceivably be a one-on-one series of duels. The Seniors were not at their best in Defense actually, they had no truly standout students in that area, the lopsided wins by Harry and Drew in the Olympic Defense events certainly bore this out. Indeed it appeared that the best fighters in Senior Defense were Fred and George, who were only in the Regular classes, and very glad of it in this issue. They had sparred with Harry enough to know that neither could take him unless Harry had at least two broken legs and a broken arm. And then, maybe.

There were 10 students in each class, and all of them knew, or knew of, each other by now. Except Harry, who could only put names to six of the Senior faces, though everyone looked familiar. Ripley came in last this time, and gathered everyone around him.

“Okay, this is our first, last, and only dual session for this year. Seniors, this is going to be your last mass duel, or anything of the like, before we start reviewing for NEWT’s later in the week. Juniors, this is nothing more than practice, practice, practice. It will take the place of your Tuesday afternoon class, with you Seniors not needing to show up tomorrow morning. This is not something we’ve done in the past, combining these two classes, but I want you folks to get some fresh blood into your duels. Originally we would have had three mass duels this calendar year so far, but the Lycan invasion screwed that up somewhat. Now what today is going to be is this: You will have 10 one-on-one duels, then a mass team duel with a 30 minute time limit. Any questions so far?”

“How are the individual duels chosen?”

“Random draw Amanda, there will be names out of a hat for each side. No points will be given for winning or losing a duel, you all get full credit just for being here. That said, I want you to give it your best in each of the two exercises, as class participation is still a vital

component of your overall grades. Anyone not giving it your best will be docked points. So even if you draw a much superior duelist, say Harry for instance, you should still do your best. Now, I have two hats here. One had the Senior names, one has the Junior names. I'll draw one from the Senior hat, and that person will draw their opponent." He reached into the Senior hat, and pulled out a slip of paper.

"Ken Nolan, you're up first. Please make your draw." Ken was a Jefferson House person, and none of the non-Jefferson gang had ever spoken with him. He was at the top of the Basic Combat rankings for his year, not saying much for these Seniors, but one had to be very good to get into this class in the first place. In his NEWT later in the month, he would get an O. The lad reached into the other hat and pulled out a name.

"Sophie Weir."

Sophie looked at Ripley, and in a very Harry-like question:

"What are the limits?" Ripley assumed, though he didn't know for sure, that Harry had given Sophie some tips on fighting. This was his chance to find out, and he was very happy that Sophie had been drawn first.

"Good question Sophie. Nothing Dark or that by itself would lead to a med station trip. Much like our other duels this academic year. The duel ends with the winner in possession of the other wand, without Summoning it directly. You have to use your hand to take it from their hand. You will stand 10 meters apart. Take your positions if you will." Sophie and Ken moved into the middle of the street, and marched off the required distance.

"Begin."

Sophie threw herself flat on her back as she whipped her wand up:

"REPULSAR!"

Nolan's Stunner went right into where her stomach would have been, but her Pulse spell nailed him right in the chin. It was far enough away that it didn't break any bones, but it still planted him firmly into the ground. Just like Sophie, except that she instantly sprang up and hit him with:

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Right in the left foot. It was a solid shot though, and was enough to freeze him. The whole thing had lasted less than five seconds. Sophie walked up and took his wand, which wasn't even aimed for a second shot yet. She handed it to a very intrigued Ripley, who turned and looked right at Harry. Harry was just smiling with a teacher's satisfaction, as his girlfriend went over and put her arm around him. Nolan was revived, and took a small amount of ribbing as he went back to his place, but not too much. They all assumed that Harry's girlfriend would get some extra help from the lad himself.

"Okay, after that warm-up, let's move on. Nice display though Sophie, very nice. Next up is Eric Roth. Eric, pick your opponent." Eric Roth was one of two Cortez Seniors in the class, and he and the gang got along very well.

Eric drew Amanda Knight, and proceeded to defeat her in about two minutes, using a combination of quickness and spell accuracy. Knight was arguably more powerful, but she wasn't able to make contact on the quicker Roth, the second best player on the horrid Cortez squad. This duel was followed by Senior Bill Broyles taking down Harold Abrahams in about the same amount of time. The Seniors, who upon hearing the format had been fearful of a sweep, were now getting a little cocky.....though that might have been premature, as Roth was their second best fighter, and Broyles arguably third.

Liesel Matthews was thankfully not matched up with her boyfriend Jim Bouton, and proceeded to rout Shawnee Senior Marissa Silver in less than a minute. Liesel was not up to the level of Harry or Drew yet, but a duel between her and Sophie for the third slot in the class would be an even proposition. This would bear watching during their Senior year.

Jefferson Senior Kate Bigelow drew Reiko, and the two fought the longest duel of the day, with Reiko ultimately being better shape, and able to run around the most. She barely got hit, and Ripley was wondering to himself how she would have done in the Dodge-a-thon. It helped that Bigelow did not have a very fast rate of fire, but still.

Jim Bouton was next, and he drew Claudia. Bouton was the top athlete in his class, and exposed the fact that Claudia was decidedly not athletic.....no, she was not overweight by any stretch unless you were hiring a fashion model, but Bouton wore her down over the course of the three minute contest. It was now 3-3, and the Seniors knew that they didn't have a chance against Harry or Drew, so they needed to win the other two to have a decent shot at a tie.

Steve Hovely, a Proctor Senior kept the dream alive by taking out Eric Liddell in short order, using a mass of Rictusempra and an Itching Charm that he liked to use. It kept Liddell so occupied that he barely got off any shots, and was soon on the ground and his wand in Hovely's hand.

Ed Lattimore was up next, and he picked Ray Elwood's name. The assembled gang was a little torn at first, Lattimore being a Housemate and all, but with the Seniors urging Lattimore on.....well they didn't get a chance to decide, as Elwood put up his strongest shield and simply deflected Lattimore's barrage until he got close enough to put a Stunner right between his eyes. A bit anti-climactic, but things were now even at 4-4.

Mike Marshall, a Jefferson Senior, walked over to the hat and pulled out:

“Harry Potter.”

As the two students took their places, Ripley asked for a favor.

“Harry, if you would do something for me.”

“Yes sir?”

“Don’t use your quick draw. We already know that you’re faster than anybody in the room, me included. Try something different for this one if you don’t mind.” Marshall, resigned though he was to losing, did not like this.

“Just a second Professor Ripley, I don’t like this rule. Let him come at me with his best and no less. Under your rules I might get lucky and nail him, but what good would it do when he was handicapped from jump?” Harry just shrugged, he wasn’t worried either way.

“Whatever you guys want is fine with me.” His gesture turned down, Ripley stepped back to his spot.

“All right then, on my signal.”

“GO!”

Harry’s wand flashed and Marshall was flat on his back, head slamming into the ground. Harry hadn’t used Stupefy, just Repulsar.....but the impact of Marshall’s head hitting the ground knocked him out. Marshall had gotten a couple of letters of a spell out of his mouth, but the rest kind of died on the vine. Harry walked over to Mike and got his wand, and tossed it to Ripley. The Seniors, most all of whom had witnessed this in the Reducto Challenge, were still awestruck.

“Hey, he wanted me to go full out didn’t he?” The Juniors, who had seen this kind of thing more than a few times, were laughing at the looks on the Seniors’ faces. Actually Harry respected the guy for not wanting the free help, and would tell him so after class.

Last up was Drew against Shawnee Senior Bobby Lasko. Lasko had barely made it into Basic Combat, and had regressed over the last two years to the point that he was barely staying afloat. He did not have a drug problem, or boy/girl problems, he just stopped caring. Murray and Heyman had tried to force counseling on him, but Lasko’s wealthy parents always stepped in and said nothing was wrong.

There was a lot wrong today, as Drew made an example of him, battering him with a series of half-powered Pulse Spells from all angles. Lasko threw out a few half-hearted Stunners, but Drew would advance a meter after every barrage, and within two minutes Lasko was down for the count. A disgusted Drew just walked back over to the Juniors, as Lasko eventually got back to his feet. He got some funny looks from his fellow Seniors, to which he merely replied:

“Only four more weeks until graduation.” He had put on a burst at the beginning of the term, ensuring that he would be able to loaf through the final month before graduation. Ripley just shook his head sadly at the potential being wasted, and moved on.

“Now for the team competition. I reckon you all are assuming it will something similar to the last mass duels, or even something clever. Nope. Seniors will start at one end of the street, the Juniors at the other. The goal is capture the other team’s flag, which will be at their starting point. You have free reign to use whatever tactics you want, but the spell and curse limitations from before still apply. Oh, and no Summoning the other team’s flag, though you can Summon your own if you feel it’s in a jam. You’ll have five minutes to prepare and plan strategy, Juniors to the left, Seniors to the right.” The Seniors were already grumbling about this to themselves, feeling that this was a no-win situation. The Juniors just wanted to get this over with so that they could loaf around the rest of the day. They all looked to Harry, who had played Capture the Flag before in muggle primary school, but that was a long time ago. He examined the end of the street that they were on, and was interrupted by Ripley.

“Don’t put the Pink on the flag Harry, that wouldn’t be cricket, as you Brits like to say.”

“You’re ruining all my plans Professor Ripley.” Ripley laughed.

“How many tenths of a second did it take you to put down Mike? You’ll survive. No Disillusionment Charms or anything of the like either.” He went back to his post, after telling an interested Lattimore what he and Harry had talked about.

“Well I wasn’t going to try it anyway, but there you go. All right then, we’re going to treat this like a football field.....sorry, soccer. Drew and I will play defense near the flag, since we’re the spell casters with the most range. Harold, Amanda, I want you both on the far right side, Eric and Claudia on the far left. You lot will be our forwards. Reiko, Sophie, you’ll be our left midfield, stay on that specific line. Ray, Liesel, you play right midfield with the same mission in mind. I’m pairing you lot up because I want one person holding up a shield, one firing at the enemy. Stay in your specific sightlines, so that you don’t get any fire from behind you. Drew and I will take the middle defense, we’ll shoot down the center. Forwards, use Repulsar as your main weapon, and fire it as often as you can to keep them busy. Midfielders, use whatever strikes your fancy, but try to knock out any shields they might be putting up. Any questions so far?” There didn’t seem to be any.

“Good, now we won’t even try to go for their flag until we’ve taken out their first five. After we do, I want the forwards to advance slowly up the street, while the rest of us keep laying down fire. Get on your proper sides of the street now, but don’t move up until he gives the go.” They did as instructed, and they could see the Seniors deploying as well. Harry had one last question, which he shouted down to his teacher.

“Professor Ripley! What if we accidentally destroy their flag?!”

“Then you lose!”

Well at least that was out of the way. Ripley waited until everyone had stopped moving, before shouting:

“Begin!”

The Seniors had decided on a radically different strategy than Harry: They did a Braveheart style charge, apparently hoping that the surprise and force of it would get one of them to the flag. Harry screamed out:

“STAY WITH THE PLAN, DEPLOY NOW!”

He laid down a pair of earthquake spells at the front of the Senior charge as he said that, and the ripple took half of them off their feet instantly. The forwards quickly ran up to their positions, but Eric and Claudia decided against the shield part of their pairing, and quick-fired Repulsar at the foes, halting the advance temporarily. Harold and Amanda stayed a little further back than Harry would have liked, but Harold put up his shield and Amanda fired mainly at the ones already on the ground, keeping them there. The midfielders saw what they were doing and started firing Stunners at those already on the ground, and Reiko and Liesel each took out a Senior in the first barrage. Bouton and Lattimore seemed to be leading them, and they hollered at their teammates to surge forward, the two of them a few meters back 'managing' their side of the battle. Harry picked this out and said to Drew.

"Go after Bouton, I'll take Ed. Stupefy, now!" Both of them started laying down Stunners right at the feet of the Senior leaders. Liesel, for some reason, had started firing a series of Smoke Jinxes, and the two Junior leaders took full advantage of that, counting on the assumption that Lattimore and Bouton weren't going to move.

Not a bad assumption, as they took out Bouton immediately, and dealt a couple of glancing blows to Lattimore. Not enough to put him unconscious, but he was shook up enough to be taken out of the battle for a few precious moments.

The Juniors had still not lost a person yet, and the Seniors were down to seven.....so in poker terminology, they were short stacked, and it cost them dearly. They didn't retreat though, to their credit, and Ken Nolan and Bill Broyles got a handle on the firing patterns of Amanda Knight and Harold Abrahams, who were alternating their firing and shielding, and charged right past them, without even trying to hit them with anything. Nolan ran right into Ray Elwood, knocking him down as Broyles got past Liesel Matthews. He was now only five meters from the flag, he could almost taste it. Just two little obstacles in his way.

Harry Potter and Drew Baylor.

The Smoke Jinx had hid their position from him, he had just assumed that they were going to move forward and go for the Senior's flag. Drew handled this, as Harry was still randomly going after foes further away. He nailed Broyles with a Stunner right between the eyes, as Liesel got him on the back from behind. He would be woken up later with a bad headache and a sore back. Ray recovered first from his collision with Nolan, and stunned him as they were on the ground. This left four Seniors, and Harry shouted to his teammates to go for the coup de grace.

“Forwards, go after the flag! Midfielders cover them!”

Claudia and Amanda had both been taken down, but Eric and Harold, the fastest of the Juniors in a foot race, both took off sprinting, as Sophie, Reiko and friends started throwing around Repulsar as if their lives depended on it. That had the effect of keeping the remaining Seniors too busy to bother the sprinters, and made quite the difference. The ‘field’ was only 40 meters long from flag to flag, and it didn't take long. Harold was better in the short sprint, and got there a split second before Eric did. Lattimore had just been about to make a final charge when he saw this, and immediately sat back down. Ripley walked into the middle.

“GAME OVER!”

Everyone lowered their wands, and those unconscious were revived. The Juniors had just lost two, while the Seniors had lost seven in the end, along with their flag. Harry and Drew hadn't really needed to do much, so the ‘score’ was not even as close as it seemed. Ripley was surprisingly gentle with the older students during the playback, even if they had got eviscerated. Ken Nolan and Bill Broyles, the ones who had done the best arguably, were the only members of the Great Lakes Seniors who had gotten into the Auror Academy, and Broyles had just barely gotten the final slot of the 10 awarded every year. Harry was lauded for his strategy, though he gave all the credit to his teammates for sticking to that strategy, given the surprise of the Senior charge.

All in all, it was a fun way to begin the winding down of the school year for the Basic Combat students. For the Seniors, the rest of the month would be NEWT review and the NEWT's themselves. The Juniors would continue on with their normal curriculum, with a twist. Ripley told them to start coming up with ideas for the mass duel on the first day of class in September. He would pick the best one among them and go with it.

Friday, June 6, 1997

Great Lakes Dining Hall

Lunchtime

This was a special mail call during lunch, of the muggle variety. SAT scores had arrived, for the vast majority of the Junior class, as well as a few Seniors who had rolled the dice for a better score. The envelopes were delivered to each student by the house elf staff, and a demonstration of the thaw between the staff and Dobby was noted in that they gave him the gang's envelopes. Fred grabbed them from Dobby and George put up a Silencing Bubble around the table.

"Let's see, who's first.....hmmmm." Claudia didn't like this idea.

"C'mon twin, give them to us." For lack of a better way to tell them apart, Claudia and Reiko had taken to calling them 'twin', while the rest used some combination of Gred and Forge. Except for Harry of course, he wouldn't even tell Sophie the secret.

"Nope, you should do this publicly. I mean you're all going to share them anyway, and George has ensured that it's family only listening." Marie was sitting at another table, with her roommates, though she and Drew were probably two more dates away from being called a couple.

"Oh all right, just get it over with." Fred closed his eyes and held up an envelope, he opened them and read off the name.

“Jonas Daniel Steele. Daniel’s a lovely name by the way. Do we know any Daniel’s George.”

“Wasn’t there one at Hogwarts in our year?” Fred scratched his head with his free hand, and seemed about to reply.....

“Just open the envelope!” That was Claudia, not Jonas, who preferred not to know really. Fred ripped open the envelope as he replied.

“Jeez, calm down Claudia Jean, I’m sure you did great. Jonas mate, you got a 550 Verbal and a 590 Written. Whatever that means. Your total score is 1140.” That was a pretty good score for someone who hadn’t intended to take the test until two days before the filing deadline. It would, in theory, preclude Jonas from becoming a Virginia Cavalier, though Michael Steele had already assured his son that he would reach out through his banking and financial connections, and do what he could.....and not just for Jonas. Plus there was the specter of a little magical help.

“That’s better than I thought I would do, not too bad at all.” There were a lot of smiles around the table, as Fred randomly took another envelope.

“Reiko Elizabeth Aylesworth, another great middle name. Very British, very royal. Let’s see now: 700 Verbal and 650 Written. Total score of 1350. Not bad for an athlete.” Reiko was very pleased, she had not put nearly the studying time in that Sophie and Claudia had, having not really decided until the Christmas Holiday to take the tests. She didn’t really think of herself as an athlete though, just a scholar who was in good shape. Fred continued.

“Next up for our listening audience is Warrick Martin Forrester. Lot’s of Martins in your family I’m betting. Like that cousin coming here in a couple of months. Warrick mate, you got a 490 Verbal and a 650 Written. That’s 1140, just like Jonas. Hope you two didn’t have a bet going or anything.” Warrick let out a sigh of relief, he had been dreading being the lowest score not named Harry. He and Jonas did have a \$10 bet going, they would have to push it to something else.

“Harry James Potter, our brother and business partner, who took this test to avoid buying his girlfriend tampons, if you believe the stories.” The entire table went up in howl of laughter, and it was a good thing that no one had any food in their mouths. Sophie just pointed at Harry while howling.

“See what happens when you make jokes like that? They come back to haunt you don’t they.” Harry adopted a pompous look on his face.

“It was funny then and it’s funny now, I have no regrets.”

“If only we could have been there, our influence clearly. Anyhow, Harry got a 500 on his Verbal and a 600 on his Written. Not bad, not bad at all. We’ve never asked you, how good were your muggle grades?”

“Not terrible, I was usually in the top half of my class. It was hard to study at the Dursley’s most of the time. Is 1100 good?” Sophie’s grin was ear-to-ear.

“Very good for someone who didn’t want to take the test in the first place, and didn’t prepare a whit. I’m very proud of you boyfriend.” That’s all Harry needed to hear, and he still didn’t want to go to university. There would be no applying for him this time either, Harry would have to give the application to Murray to get her to release his grades. He was still last in the gang, but no one had expected anything else.

“Only three left, and next is Andrew Mitchell Baylor, only son of the Head Auror of Milwaukee and a future President of the Magical United States. We hope. Merlin only knows the number of swamps we would have contracted from us then. Drew, you got a 750 Verbal and 750 Written. That’s 1500 total mate, and even we know that that’s pretty high.” Drew looked very smug just then, and he explained why.

“That’s 10 and 40 points better than my sisters, I can’t wait to see them again. I got a lot of flack from them as a kid. Heh heh.” Smug was an odd look on Drew, but everyone at the table acknowledged that he had good cause. Family rivalry was family rivalry, the twins knew that better than anyone.

“And you don’t even want to go to college either.”

“Well.....let’s see what happens, I don’t have to decide now.” Drew was vacillating on the whole thing, not liking the idea of being in the Auror Academy at the same time his mother would be running for President, things might be a little awkward for his instructors. Michael Chabon would not be seeking re-election, due to term limits, and the 1998 election to replace him was only 17 months away.

“Claudia Jean Cregg, this is your life.....score.....whatever. You got 700 Verbal and 770 Written. Your total is 1470.” Claudia was not a natural scholar, and had only really started applying herself once she had gotten out of the drug den that was her childhood home. She had worked very hard to get where she was, and these scores pleased her very much. If there was an impediment to them all getting into the university of their choice, it wouldn’t be her.

“Okay, that’s all, let’s get back to our food.”

“HEY!” Fred was sitting next to Sophie as it happened, and theatrically wiggled a finger in the ear that caught that blast.

“ Sophie Natalie Weir, age 17, and the apple of a certain Welsh/English young man’s eye. And ours too, if we would be allowed to admit that without Harry slitting our throats on the way out the door. Sophie, you got 800 Verbal and 760 Written, for a total of 1560. Congratulations Sophie, you are the champion of the group, by 60 points. I don’t know if that’s a lot or a little, but you wear the crown.” Sophie couldn’t say anything because Harry had leapt up and was hugging the breath right out of her.

“That’s terrific, and an 800 to boot.”

“I did do pretty well didn’t I?”

“How did Ned and Jason do?”

“Ned wrote me that he tanked his, and barely got into Illinois. He wouldn’t tell me what the score was, and I never asked Jason. Ned’s grades were always great though. Jason got a 1540, he was always pointed toward Northwestern.” Northwestern was an outstanding academic school, and Jason Weir had barely gotten in, even with his outstanding SAT score and killer grades. George took the bubble off of the table, and every Junior who had taken the test started the process of who got what. Ray Elwood wound up with a 1570, the highest score of the class, with Sophie right behind him in second. Overall the Juniors were an average of 15 points better than what the current Seniors had gotten on theirs, though they did not have a score matching Jennifer Keller’s 1600, which matched Michelle Ganoff’s like score from the year before.

Great Lakes grades were due to be sent out on July 15, not counting OWL’s and NEWT’s, which these people didn’t have to worry about, those who were college planning anyway. Dobby would pick up their grade envelopes, and a council of war was already planned for that night to decide on where to apply. In another benefit of the Wizard government owning so many patents, students would have the filing fees covered for the first 10 schools they applied to. Those fees could pile up if a student wanted a wide spread of options, and most Great Lakes students took the entire 10.

Saturday, June 14, 1997

10:00 am

Great Lakes Athletic Field

Deputy Headmaster David Heyman had drawn the announcing assignment for the first game of the day. He and Murray were both put in the draw this year for the first time, though Murray still had not been chosen yet.

“Welcome everyone to the final sports weekend of the year. Our first Quidditch match will feature Shawnee House v. Cortez House. If Cortez wins or ties the game, the Quidditch Championship will be theirs.” Lots of cheering from the Cortez faithful, which included many alumni as well. This was a big day for them, seeing their old House triumphant. It was worth noting that the Euro Quidditch recruiting strategy had been submitted to Murray, along with a proposal to begin a series with the other three schools. She liked the second part of it, and would talk it over with her fellow school heads Robert Clary, James Morrison, and Beau Shupe.....the first part she vetoed immediately. Her sarcastic reply to the delegation:

“Oh so we should become like muggle universities now? With their recruiting perversions? How many thousands of dollars are you collecting to offer these mercenaries!?”

That shut them up for the time being, but she knew it would be coming again. She floored the Education Director for the Wizarding Government, and that official, Andrea Fox, was in total agreement that it should be Harry-style hardship cases only for the foreseeable future. Fox had not exactly needed to sign off on Harry himself, but she had still be consulted before Murray sent Harry his acceptance letter.

“Now let’s meet the players again! For Shawnee:”

“At Keeper, a Junior from Manistee, Michigan: Tim Spooneybarger!”

“At Seeker and Captain, a Senior from Akron, Ohio: Paul Zuvella!”

“At Beater, a Senior from Muncie, Indiana: Joey Devine!”

“At Beater, a Senior from Appleton, Wisconsin: Peter Smith!”

“At Chaser, a Transition from Coralville, Iowa: Mike Kelly!”

“ At Chaser, a Transition from Memphis, Tennessee: Scott Thorman!”

“At Chaser, a Senior from Chicago, Illinois: Paul Bako!”

By sheer chance, the Shawnee Quidditch team was the only all-male squad in the school currently. Team Captain Paul Zuvella had taken the initiative to go to Murray and explain his decision making process when making his final cuts, hoping to forestall any protests. She had taken him at his word, and when no Shawnee women made a direct complaint to her or Heyman, let the matter drop.

“And now for the league leaders from Cortez!”

“At Keeper, a Freshman from Whitewater, Wisconsin: Jane Abbott!”

“ At Seeker, a Junior from Alice Springs, Oklahoma: Reiko Aylesworth!” .

“At Captain and Beater, a Senior from Minneapolis, Minnesota: John Geyser!”

“At Beater, a Junior from Indianapolis, Indiana: Warrick Forrester!”

“At Chaser, a Senior from Ottery St. Catchpole, England: George Weasley!”

“At Chaser, a Senior from Ottery St. Catchpole, England: Fred Weasley!”

“At Chaser, a Junior from Godric’s Hollow, Wales: Harry Potter!”

There was to be an all-school team named at the end of the day, for symbolic purposes only, and it would interesting to see its composition. The crowd cheered both teams equally, a lot of the Jefferson and Proctor students feeling sorry for the Shawnee squad, already the worst in the league and now having to face the British onslaught. The was definitely the twins’ last game, and they wanted to go out in style. This did not bode well for Shawnee.

The 14 players all gathered at midfield, in the air that is, for the pre-game talk by celebrity referee Cooper Manning, who had done

Quidditch back in October for those in the crowd with good memories. He stressed the new no violence policy, and May referee Shawn Respert had alerted him to the 'punch someone and you and your Keeper both get kicked out' scheme, and he was all for it. He repeated the warning to the Captains, and they assured him that they had nothing but a nice, clean game on their minds.

"The Quaffle goes up, and the Snitch and Bludgers are released! Harry takes the Quaffle and blitzes downfield, no one can catch him as he comes up on Tim.....yikes, they almost collide as Harry drops the ball off for Fred Weasley, he scores!" At Heyman's request, the twins had had Dobby sew numbers on the back of their jerseys the night before. This was done even before Heyman knew that he was going to be the announcer.

"Bako takes the Quaffle.....no, George snatches it right out of his arm, poking it out and catching it in one move.....he's downfield.....scores! It's now 20-0 for Cortez."

This continued on for about 25 minutes, as the Brits racked up goal after goal on their hapless opponents. What's more, Harry and his bodyguards were doing everything they could not to even come in direct contact with the other Chasers, wanting to prove a point one could suppose. The trio was just too fast for their opponents, and it was easily turning into a rout. It was 300-0 before Zuvella called time out, the Snitch not having made an appearance yet.

Geyser looked at the Brits.

"Okay, I know this goes against your every nature guys, but maybe you should get some passing drills in, delay the inevitable." Funny thing, Fred and George didn't like this idea.

"Oh c'mon John, those blokes aren't even trying out there! They deserve to get massacred if that's all the effort they're going to put out." George was nodding in agreement with his brother, and Harry was looking up at the Shawnee stands. There was no booing coming from there, just cheering for their inept boys.

“I think they’re trying guys, they just suck is all. Let’s do what John wants for the next little while.”

“You’ve picked a fine time to become merciful.” Harry laughed at the shot, and the twins couldn’t resist grinning as well.

“I have to live here another year guys, let’s take it easy on them. One shot for every five passes, like Hoosiers.”

“Fine, fine. Let’s get back up there. Jane, can we conjure you a pillow?” Jane Abbott hadn’t faced a shot yet, as the Brits had barely let the Shawnees get across the midfield line.

“I am getting a little bored, I’ll let you know.” Jane Abbott worshipped the twins, and may have even had a tiny crush on them.....well one of them, they were so alike in most every way.

So the Cortez players took a little easy for the next 20 minutes, only scoring 10 goals as the Snitch appeared briefly a couple of times. It didn’t hang around long enough for Zuvella or Reiko to get a good run at it. The crowd wasn’t so much getting bored, as they had pretty much stopped paying attention to the game and were chatting among themselves, other than those with close friends in the game. During a brief lull in the action, Zuvella flew up to Geyser.

“Dude, the Snitch ain’t coming today. Just get the 10 goals for the mercy rule and let’s be done with it.”

“You sure Paul?” He looked over and saw the twins playing keep away, the Shawnee Chasers had by now pretty much given up.

“Yeah, and we appreciate you telling the Limeys to ease off on us. I know they wouldn’t be doing it unless you told them. Tell them to turn the pressure back on so we can go eat lunch.”

“All right, if you say so.” Geyser seemed kind of reluctant, but took him at his word. He flew up to the nearest twin, George, and told him that the spigot was now on.

The Brits quickly got the 10 goals needed to invoke the mercy rule, helped by the fact that the traumatized Shawnee Keeper Spoonybarger was almost too tired to lift his arms properly. He, along with Seeker Zuvella, had given his best the entire time, to no avail.

“And Harry scores his 14th goal, and the Mercy Rule is now invoked. Cortez wins the game 500-0. Harry Potter had 14 goals, Fred Weasley 17, and George Weasley 19 for the day. Congratulations to Cortez, as they have clinched the Quidditch Cup!”

“Now before we go back to school and our lunch, let us honor these Seniors, who have played their final games for our beloved Great Lakes:”

“Paul Zuvella!”

“Peter Smith!”

“Joe Devine!”

“Paul Bako!”

“John Geyser!”

“Fred Weasley!”

“George Weasley!”

Much applause for all seven of the men, particularly for Joe Devine and John Geyser, who had played every game over seven years, something that was not that common. Warrick would get that round of applause next year, something he was already looking forward to. Fred, George, and Harry all went up to Tim Spoonybarger, and had this exchange with him.

“Look mate, recognizing that you did your best and all against us, there’s a free grab bag of WWW products that will be delivered to you after dinner tonight.”

“Yeah, we feel a bit bad about the shellacking your teammates made you take, you know, them not trying and all.”

“Don’t tell anyone about it though, they might think that we bribed you ahead of time, and we can’t be having that.” Harry’s fellow Junior, though he had no classes with him, didn’t know quite what to say.

“Thanks, I guess. You don’t have to do this.” Fred patted him on the back.

“You were tough out there young man, and if we prize anything in Quidditch, it’s toughness. Good luck next year, when George and I won’t be here, and Harry will probably be playing Seeker again.” That lifted Tim’s spirits right there, and he shook hands with all there of them before joining his friends.

The gang joined up with the Brits to walk out of the stadium.

“That was the worst game I’ve ever seen.”

“Well that’s what happens when most of one team quits at the first whistle Claudia, I don’t know what you expected.”

“C’mon Fred, they were just overmatched is all.”

“More mercy from Harry, someone please take a picture.”

“ I save my mercilessness for Death Eaters, Lycans, and Dumbledore. Not necessarily in that order.”

“Not much room after you crowd all of those folks in.”

The second game of the day, and last of the season, could be termed ‘The Sally Jenkins Rebound Game.’ She scored 30 goals on Proctor,

dominating the Quaffle like few had seen in recent years. Her fellow Chasers Marc Stein and Christine Brennan got three goals between them, and only double that many shots on goal. The Proctor Chasers didn't do badly, scoring 12 goals, and with Ray Elwood catching the Snitch, Jefferson only won 330-270, and Ray somehow became the only Seeker to catch two Snitches during the season. The game took only 65 minutes, as the scoring resembled a football game with a pair of run and shoot offenses. Jefferson clinched second place with the victory, with Proctor finishing third and Shawnee in the cellar in fourth. The race for the Cup had been tainted somewhat by the arrival of Harry, Fred, and George, the latter two who had gotten to pick their House. The other students didn't mind really though, as Harry had gone through the chairs, and Cortez was likely to win anyway because of it.....though the Jefferson game might have gone much differently. It helped that the twins ran WWW.

At dinner that night, Murray rose from her spot and asked for everyone's attention.

"This year, the Quidditch competition was a little different than in past years. One team dominated the entire season, thanks in part to troubles in Great Britain. Cortez House went through their schedule like a buzz saw, and for that reason, we the faculty have decided against an all season team.....since it would be Cortez players and Sally Jenkins only. Cortez players, come up when we call your names.

"Novice Reserve Chaser Malcolm Reynolds."

"Novice Reserve Chaser Jane Cobb."

"Novice Reserve Chaser Billy Amend." Amend had, of course, played in the first game, though he had not scored.

"Freshman Reserve Chaser Kim Cuthbert." See Amend, Billy.

"Freshman Keeper Jane Abbot."

"Junior Chaser/Seeker Reiko Aylesworth."

“Junior Beater Warrick Forrester.”

“Junior Seeker/Chaser, and 1996-7 Player of the Year, Harry Potter.” Even Sally Jenkins applauded him, the POY would have easily been hers otherwise. She took satisfaction that the twins weren’t going to be around next year to harass her.

“Senior Chaser George Weasley.”

“Senior Chaser Fred Weasley.”

“Senior Beater and Captain John Geyser. John played in all 21 games he was eligible in during his Great Lakes Quiddich career. Let’s have a big round of applause for Cortex House, Quidditch Cup Champions.” The room had pockets of loud cheering, from the Cortez kids scattered around, and polite applause from the rest. The 11 players up at the front, did a mass bow for the assembled, and then went back to their places. Eight of them would be back the next year, though they were losing three of their four best players. The reserves had really come on the last few months in practice, and they were already talking of making Billy Amend a Beater the next year, to replace Geyser. That way they wouldn’t have to train one entirely from scratch. Warrick had already been told that as long as he didn’t burn the school down before August, that he would be named the new Captain. He resolved to get Charlie alone sometime during graduation day so that he could pick his brain about strategy.

In Quodpot the next day, Jefferson won a resounding victory over Proctor, with Shawnee eeking out a win over Cortez. Jefferson thus clinched the Quodpot Cup, with Proctor finishing second, Shawnee third, and Cortez in dead last. Senior Forward Jim Bouton was named Player of the Year, and Jonas made the all season team for the fourth year in a row. After dinner, another delegation of returning Quodpot players visited Harry and Warrick, begging them to go out for the team, going so far as to guaranteeing them slots on the team, with only the appearance of a tryout. They were politely turned down again.....though politeness was forgotten when both Marauders warned the Quodpots against trying to mess with any of their Freshman and Novice players.

“We spent months molding them for the future, don’t even think about it.”

“Yeah, don’t make us unleash Harry here.”

“Nothing would make us happier than to prank the Quodpot team until you’re begging for mercy on bended knee.”

“Right, what he said.”

They privately told the youngsters that they would be free to do as they pleased in the matter, but if they wanted to actually win something, they should stay the course.....at least until Harry, Warrick, and Reiko left. Who cares after that, right?

Saturday, June 20, 1997.

Noon

Harry’s trunk

A short letter came from Ron, addressed to all three of them. Dobby delivered it along with a large box of pranks manufactured by Dean and Seamus. Dean would be ceasing production over the summer, as he would be on his world tour, but Seamus had readily signed on for as much piecework as the twins could throw at him. The twins barely knew Seamus really, but he was their sister’s boyfriend’s best friend, which conveyed a lot of legitimacy on him.....and he really did do good work. The twins took time out from their NEWT studying to listen to Harry read it to them.....their eyes were closed from overuse, and the idea of reading anything at that moment was nausea inducing. They wanted to be able to tell their mother with a straight face that they had done all they could on the NEWT’s though. Besides, it would be the last tests they would ever take, might as well go all out for them.

Dear Harry, Fred, and George,

Congratulations on graduating twins, I know it might be hard to believe, but I'm very proud of you. I didn't really know what to get you as a present, all Hermione could suggest were books, and I didn't want to ask Ginny. So here it is: five hours of unpaid work this summer around the shop. You can tack it on to the end of the day, or make me do it in one shot, its up to you. And I promise that I'll work just as hard unpaid as I will when I'm being paid. I hope that's all right with you, I can't really take your spots throwing gnomes like I used to. It's too bad too, that was the easiest present I ever gave.

Harry, I would like to accept the Godric's Hollow offer. This is a day before your deadline, so I'm assuming it's still a valid offer. To be honest, it was only pride holding me back, foolish pride at that. It'll be good to have the three of us back together again, and I promise I won't be a wanker to your American friends. I don't know what you have in mind for tutoring or the like, but I'm in regardless. Hermione showed me your letter from last week, where we'll meet up at the Umbridge trial and go from there, so I'll be ready with my things then. It'll be good to put that thing away for life hopefully.

Oh yeah, 500-0 in Quidditch is pretty bloody impressive. I hope you guys will have a pensieve showing of those games for us, it'll be cool to see you lot as Chasers. I'm assuming Ginny told you about our Slytherin victory, it was very cool to win the Quidditch Cup again. Anyhow, Dobby looks impatient, so I'd better go.

See you blokes soon,

Ron

The three of them re-read the letter again, but couldn't find any bitterness or jealousy in the words. It was definitely in Ron's handwriting, and informal enough that Hermione probably hadn't dictated it to him. They quickly sent Dobby to Ginny to investigate, but she didn't have any information to tell them, as she and Ron were still barely talking. She had told them about the Quidditch victory, they had won 230-90, with Ginny taking the Snitch. Katie Bell had scored the last goal five seconds before Ginny caught the Snitch, and that goal had made all the difference in the tiebreaker, as Slytherin, Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw had all finished tied at 2-1. After the game,

Ginny had had a long talk with John Terry, a general manager in the Quidditch League, who had told her that she had a bright future in professional Quidditch if she kept improving like she did.

After Dobby came back with Ginny's reply, George looked at his brothers.

"We're heels you know, searching for things to find wrong with Ron." Harry looked conflicted.

"How were we supposed to know he'd be reasonable?"

"Because he's our brother, and he wasn't so bad until about a year ago."

"It's all Hermione's fault."

"You said at Christmas that she was good for Ron."

"I just said that to please Mum, and you know that Harry. Are we all agreed that Ron still does not have a permanent position with WWW after graduation?"

"Yes."

"I agree. Ginny should get the first shot at it."

"Are you still reserving the right to kick him out of Godric's Hollow Harry?"

"Of course, and Hermione too. I don't expect trouble, but that doesn't mean it isn't coming anyway."

"Will they share a room I wonder?"

"Those two prudes?"

“Well there are only five bedrooms, and a lot more than five couples.”

“Yeah, that’s 17 people, plus Dobby and Winky. All couples but Jonas, Drew, and Ginny.”

“Is Jonas going to put a move on Ginny?” Harry shrugged, he and Sophie had discussed this more than once, during halftimes.

“I don’t know, he kind of danced around the subject when I asked him. I think he digs her a little though.”

“Should we threaten him, or wait?”

“Let’s wait, Ginny will have us by the minerals if we threaten someone she actually might like.”

“Yeah, but she has Dean.” That was the sticky wicket. Jonas did, however, tend to stay away from girls with boyfriends.

“You’re her real brothers, I’m staying out of it.”

“Coward, you probably have more influence over her than Ron does.” Harry made a face at them.

“Talk about a backhanded compliment, thanks a lot. Dumbledore probably tops Ron in that department.” Fred was too tired to start a Dumbledore bashing party, so he brought things back to where they should be.

“We’re digressing. Did you promise to Marie that she could come for a visit?”

“She’s coming over anyway, to France at least, for a vacation in late July. She’ll be there for my birthday and the wedding. She’ll take the train to London and we’ll meet her at the station, then portkey over to Godric’s Hollow.”

“Alicia had an idea about congestion. She, Angelina, and the two of us could stay at Isla de Marauder. That would free up a room at least.” Harry’s mouth closed, that wasn’t a half bad idea, and he started musing on it, before Fred thought of something.

“That would involve letting Ron, Hermione, and Ginny know about the trunk floo system.” Harry shook his head, he liked the idea.

“Maybe, there are ways around that though if we’re just a little bit careful. It’s not like they’ll be going in and out of every bedroom. We can always say that you’re sleeping in the trunk, it already has one bed in it. If you four want to do that, feel free.”

“We will then, that leaves five couples and three singles.”

“There’s a basement, Reiko and Warrick have already volunteered to take that. Makes them feel at home.”

“Why haven’t you pranked them down there yet?”

“It’s more fun taunting Warrick about the possibility.”

“You and your psycho warfare.”

“That’s psychological George.” The camel’s back didn’t break, but it was creaking.

“I’m half crazy from NEWT studying there Junior! Don’t bother me with semantics!”

“Easy there brother, easy. Should I have Winky make you some tea?”

“I’ve already had six cups today. Fred?”

“I had just started number five when the letter came. I’ll gulp the rest down cold after lunch, it’s supposed to be good for you.”

“Yet you two aren't twitching yet.”

“It's coming bro, you'll get your entertainment soon enough.”

The three went down to lunch, and then the twins went back to studying. They studied all weekend for their NEWT's, focusing more on Charms, Defense, and Potions, where they might actually have a chance to score something. Their private goal was an average of two E's, and P's at worst in Herbology and Muggle Studies.

The week of tests was a most stressful time for everyone in the House, as the Transitions and Seniors had OWL's and NEWT's, and the other five years had the hassle of avoiding crazed Transitions and Juniors. Warrick and Reiko, with Harry's amused acquiescence, had sent Dobby and Winky out to Flackter Alley for multiple cases of Coke and Pepsi. They sold the cans to stressed out students at a nice mark-up, and ran up a nice business that way. Dobby was given a percentage, and could be seen levitating drinks along the halls in front of him.....particularly in front of the library. Enough money was made that Dobby and Winky could be seen sporting even more outlandish clothing than ever before. The Juniors themselves did not have a hard test week, the examinations for them counted no more than any others during the year. Lyman had told Harry that the faculty figured that OWL's and NEWT's were so stressful, the Junior students deserved a break in the action.

Fred and George made it through their exams without murdering anyone, which was made considerably easier by the fact that they did little but study and sleep. They emerged from the trunk only to eat and do stress-relief workouts in the gym down in the basement. When an incredulous Harry asked them what the hell they were playing at, they confessed that they wanted an O very badly in some subject, in order to do some serious bragging with the family. Plus, Bill and Arthur had promised them both 'rewards' if they managed to out do Charlie's NEWT scores. Charlie had gotten an O in Care of Magical Creatures, and A's in Charms, Defense, and Muggle Studies. So Charlie's grades were similar to the twins', just without the accompanying detentions, letters home, and mayhem around the house. It's all in the packaging you know.

At the end of the week they pronounced themselves satisfied with how they had done, and given that they were off Friday, they took very, very long naps. On the island, with Angelina and Alicia. So perhaps they weren't napping all of the time, they weren't ones to kiss and tell. Once finished they swore that they would never set foot in a classroom ever again, not counting visits with their children and grandchildren once they were in school. They knew they would be back at Great Lakes a lot during Harry's Senior Year, but that really wasn't the same thing.

On Friday during lunch, the students listened to live coverage of the Quidditch Drafts. John Geyser had been picked in the third round of the Australasian Draft by the Kuala Lumpur Krups, and in the second round of the American Draft by the New York Dragons. He had the option of signing with either team, and his first week after graduating would be spent negotiating and deciding on which hemisphere he wanted to live. The Australasian League, with its 24 teams, was far larger and wealthier than its American counterpart, and the team from K-L must have seen something to justify taking him. Geyser would wind up signing with them on Independence Day, and would go on to a 14 year professional career playing Beater for two Australasian and two American teams, appearing in three Quidditch World Cups for The United States National Team. The American Draft only had two rounds, and no other Great Lakes player was taken, the Seniors not being a great Quidditch playing class. The American Quidditch League Commissioner, Janet Evans, had sent a letter to Harry during the week assuring him that the AQL salary cap could easily be gotten around if Harry chose to play in the U.S. He had sent back a brief reply thanking her and assuring her that he had not decided which league he would want to play for. Because of the miracle of floo travel, he could live wherever he wanted, no matter which team drafted him. Evans letter, in fact, had hinted that he could more or less pick his team as well. This kind of thing was not unprecedented in the States. Bill Walton and Lew Alcindor in muggle basketball had both been offered such perks by the upstart American Basketball Association, though each time it was turned down.

At dinner time, the Quodpot Draft was played over the speaker system in the Dining Hall. The American Quodpot Association was 12

teams strong, with franchises all over the country. The draft was four rounds, and 10 Great Lakes players were taken over the course of the Draft, with Jim Bouton going number one to the Key West Swordfish. The draft lasted only 90 minutes, as teams only had just two minutes to make their selections, and each time a Great Lakes player was taken, they were urged to stand up and give a speech. It was a celebration of both athletics and the fact that exams were over. Bouton had been told by the Krups earlier in the week that he was their choice, and the next day at breakfast he was telling everyone that he had signed his contract, for a cool \$400,000 a year for three years, and only that little due to the rookie wage scale in place for the AQA. Endorsements would double that over the three year span, and Bouton would go on to be picked for the National Team during the coming summer. Only professionals were eligible for international play, otherwise Jonas would likely be on there too, with his superior passing skills. He told the rest of the gang that he could wait a year, he was in no hurry.

Toward the end of the meal, a few students began to head out of the Dining Hall, and Murray rose and asked them to stay.

“I have an announcement to make, and I wanted to wait until the Quodpot Draft was completed to do so. What I am about to tell you will be in The Chronicle tomorrow, but the President has given me clearance to share it with you tonight. At 3:00 pm this afternoon in New York City, a cease-fire was signed between the Lycans, Kindred, and our government. I know that you haven’t heard much of the war since the attack on our school, and no major battles have been reported, but that does not mean that this news isn’t a relief for us. Cease fire talks started last week between President Michael Chabon, Kindred Prince Mark Frankel, and Lycan Chieftain Bill Nighy, and an agreement was reached this morning to suspend all offensive attacks for the near future. Permanent peace negotiations will commence next week, and President Chabon has told me that he is very optimistic. I want you to take this news home with you for the summer, whether it be back to your parents, your brothers, or especially if you stay here for the next two months.”

“We live in an ever changing society, and we here at Great Lakes have done the best we can to prepare you all for life outside of school. But the bulk of the work is up to you, and knowing you all like we do.....well I’m not worried. So enjoys your summers, and we’ll see most of you come August. For you Seniors.....we’ll talk tomorrow at graduation. Thank you, blow off some steam tonight and have fun. And if you’re anywhere near certain members of the Junior and Senior classes, be very careful what you eat.” Fred and George looked at each other, and yelled out.

“Thanks a lot!”

“Give it away why don’t you!”

The entire room went up, and Murray winked at the gang’s table as she sat back down to finish her mud pie. Claudia leaned forward, and in a low voice.

“Guys, we weren’t planning anything, were we?”

“They don’t know that.” And they didn’t. Food in the Lounges was being tested all night, and no one was pranked. Fred and George were just too tired, and the rest of them liked the idea of making everyone nervous. The first day of school in September though, that was fair game. Plans would begin as soon as they all, save Drew and Jonas, got back to school in August. Those two, at Quodpot camp and interning in the Milwaukee Auror Command, would be kept abreast through Dobby-grams.

Saturday, June 28, 1997

The Burrow

Noon GMT

Molly hurried around the house, making sure that everyone was assembled for the trip. Arthur had had to go in for an early meeting with Bones and Rufus, but had just gotten back a few minutes earlier. Charlie had come in the night before, but only for this weekend. He

was planning to take his full vacation during the time of the wedding, which had now been set for the weekend of July 26-27. Charlie and Fleur, despite having little in common other than Bill, were sitting in the living room amiably chatting away when Molly bustled in.

“Are you both ready?”

“We are Mum, relax. The ceremony isn’t for another six hours yet, we have plenty of time.” Molly knew as much, but was a worrier anyway.

“Well it would not do to be late, plus I’m sure the twins and Harry will want you to see the school a little bit.”

“We’ll have another graduation next year to go to Molly I’m sure.” Molly wasn’t so sure, and let something slip in front of her future daughter-in-law.

“Yes we will, assuming nothing happens in the meantime.” Charlie was about to say something, when Lee tumbled through the floo.

“Hello all, we ready to go?”

“Just as soon as Arthur and Bill come in, they’re discussing something.”

“What about Angelina and Alicia?”

“They’re out in the shed, the twins wanted them to pick up something for them, I don’t know what.” The two ladies in question came in right as she said that, Alicia spoke up.

“Here we are, we just wanted to grab some batteries.” Eh? Angelina continued.

“Don’t ask us, we don’t question them when they have weird plans like this.” Molly, on some level, wanted to know.....but for the most part didn’t.

“Arthur! Bill!” The father and son came hurriedly down the stairs.

“We’re ready dear, let’s get a move on.” Neither man mentioned what they had been talking about.

“Are you sure that the portkeys are big enough for eight people dear?”

“Well it’s a muggle item called a jump rope. Very long indeed, The Minister himself arranged it for us. He gave me an envelope for the twins as well, some business matters he says.” Charlie started chuckling as they all streamed out the front door.

“Probably an order for swamps, those things are very handy to have around. We even have a supply at the Dragon Preserve, just in case. Dead useful to keep any stray muggles from wandering in on short notice.”

“The single most useful invention in the history of pranks…….by our brothers. Who could have known?” Arthur grimaced a little, as the ladies walked ahead, discussing wedding plans from the sounds of it.

“Just don’t say that in front of Harry if you don’t mind Bill.”

“He still touchy about lack of respect for Fred and George?”

“A muggle rattlesnake is less touchy than he is when it comes to those two.” Lee was chortling on the inside, he would have to tell that to the trio.

“You should be proud of that Dad, of the bond between those three.”

“I am Charlie, I am. They’re all good boys, and very driven to succeed in what they do.”

“Don’t mention that in front of Ron.”

“Ron will come around Bill, don’t worry. Though it would really help if he gets to be Head Boy, I’ve been working on Remus in that regard.” That raised the eyebrows of all three men, the image of Arthur politicking like that. Bill was curious about something.

“Did you do that for me Dad?”

“No, I didn’t have to Bill, your vote was unanimous. Even Snape voted for you, Flitwick told me once over butterbeers right before your graduation.” The vote for Head Boy and Girl was a simple majority amongst the faculty, with Dumbledore getting a vote and being the tiebreaker as well. Usually though, Dumbledore made clear his preference ahead of time and the rest of the faculty went along with what he wanted. While Bill and Percy weren’t the first set of brothers to be Head Boy, it was pretty uncommon. Charlie had been a decent, though not outstanding student during his Hogwarts days, and had not been Prefect or candidate for Head Boy. The twins didn’t even bear mentioning in Head Boy discussions, though as they would constantly point out: they preferred it that way.

“Will Ron get it?” Arthur shrugged.

“I don’t know, his grades have gone way up this year, and that was really the only thing holding him back. The only worry is Hermione, I doubt the faculty could get away with naming them both.” The group got to the edge of the portkey wards, and Arthur produced the jump rope. After a brief stopover in Iceland as always, they wound up in Boston, then in Milwaukee. In Milwaukee they met up with groups of other Great Lakes parents, who would be going en masse to the school. The Weasleys and friends spent an interesting hour getting to know some Americans, and were surprised to discover that more than one parent they talked to had seen some WWW merchandise in their homes.

With final exams done, and the departure of most students due the following morning, the building was alive with the sounds of packing, as the parents walked up from the athletic stadium, where the portkey point was.. Bill remembered where the Cortez Lounge was, while Lee,

Angelina, and Alicia were all reminding each other quietly that the two women had technically never been inside the school before. They reached the Lounge door, and were pleasantly surprised to find it cracked open. They walked in and saw over 200 students and parents crowded in it somehow, so it took some time to get to the hallway entrance. Once there, they went all the way down to end, on the right. That was Casa de Fred and George. The door was slightly cracked, and Bill, remembering the Pink, shouted:

“Hey, anybody home for some family!?”

“Come on in, we took the Pink off this morning!” That was Fred, and everyone piled into the room, which had all of the gang in it already. Seniors were allowed to leave that night with their families if they chose, though Fred and George declined, wanting to go back with Harry and the others.

Molly found the older ones with red heads, and gave them both hugs.

“My graduating boys. I’m so proud of both of you.” As stated before, the twins hadn’t heard much of that over the years, so they were very pleased.

“Remember, it was Dad’s idea Mum.” Arthur smiled and put an arm around them both.

“No boys, it was Harry’s idea, I just gave you a nudge.”

“He has a good idea every once in awhile. And no detentions for 10 weeks, that’s a record. I doubt Ron has managed that kind of streak this year at all.” Everyone in the room looked at Molly.

“Well I don’t know, he’s been a lot quieter there now, without his partner in crime here.” She gave Harry a hug.

“I didn’t have one detention this year thank you very much.” They all knew why too, everyone except for Molly and Arthur: The Marauder’s Map III.....well, II ½. That and his deal with Murray had kept him very clean. Bill chuckled.

“A bloody miracle if you ask me. Too bad they don’t have Head Boy here, I’m sure someone in this room would get it.” George’s finger immediately started pointing.

“That would be Drew, big brother. Drew and Reiko would be Head Boy and Girl, and we would be very sorry to miss that.” Drew made a face.

“I’ll pass on that thank you, I’ve heard enough about that gig from these three that I would never want it.....umm.....no offense Bill.” He had just remembered that a former holder of the title was with them.

“None taken, I’m sure you heard the high points of our friend Dumbledore. He sends his regards Fred and George, he was quite impressed that you volunteered to resume your schooling, particularly when I assured him that you lot hadn’t lost a bet with anyone to force it.” Both twins made a face at the mention of Dumbledore.

“We’ll send him a Howler as a thank you. Its brunch time, we were waiting for you lot to get here and we’re starving.”

“Lead on graduates.” They each made a face, a bit habit forming it was.

“Anyone but you Mum.....” Drew was introduced to Charlie and Fleur as everyone went down to a very full Dining Hall. They managed to snag a big table as others were leaving it, the room was very noisy, but conversation was managed anyway. Arthur gave his sons the envelope from Rufus, and they immediately tore it open.

“What is it guys? A swamp order?”

“Oh we got that months ago, I guess President Chabon suggested it to The Minister or something. No, it’s an invitation for us both to join The Dark Force Defense League. And it has a Harry clause in it.” Molly had never heard of something like that, though she had a sinking feeling.

“A Harry clause?”

“Yeah Mum, it says that we won’t fall under Dumbledore’s orders, we would report directly to The Minister. It’s the same deal he gave Harry last month.”

“He knows we don’t have much interest in following the old git.”

“ANY interest Fred, let’s be clear on that.”

“But you’re members of the Order.” They both rolled their eyes with practiced synergy.

“In name only Mum, we haven’t been to a meeting in months.”

“But you’re coming back to Diagon Alley to live though, you’ll be able to attend now.” Of the entire family, Molly was the one who disliked Dumbledore the least, and far and away the one who most hoped for a reconciliation between the Headmaster and Harry and his faction.....which of course consisted of at least three of her sons, and maybe Ron and Ginny too.

“No thanks. Being at a proper school, with no Death Eater teachers or Draco Malfoys has only made us despise that wanker Headmaster even more. I feel sorry for Ginny having to live in that castle for two more years.” No mention of Ron, but Molly and Arthur took comfort in that they at least weren’t trashing him. To their faces. Beggars can’t be choosers after all.

Molly attempted for the rest of the meal to change their minds, but they wouldn’t have any, though they were polite about it. Harry, more than once, had said flat out to the twins that being active members of the Order wouldn’t be betraying him or his feelings, but Fred and George would have none of that.

“Yes it bloody well would be betraying you, it was all I could do to keep from hexing him blind during the last Order meeting, and you weren’t even brought up.”

“You two against the old man, that would be an interesting fight.”

“It would last about 10 seconds, it’s not like we would formally challenge him after all. I know you wouldn’t.” They all shared evil grins.

“No I wouldn’t, but it hasn’t come to that yet.”

“What about McGonagall?”

“Her I would challenge formally no problem. She needs a comeuppance. Let’s see if Ron or Hermione get screwed out of Head Boy and Girl first. The notices are supposed to be sent in July, or so Neville wrote me.”

“You wouldn’t really duel her over that would you?”

“No, but the more I think about my five years there, the more I loathe her.”

“Which of us is going to be your second I wonder?” Harry pondered that for a few seconds.

“Are you familiar with rock, paper, scissors?”

“Yeah, why?”

“On three.” Fred and George grinned, and got ready.

“One.

“Two.”

“Three!”

Fred had paper, George had rock. Paper covers rock, and Fred ‘won’.

“So it’s me against Dumbledore, you know he would be her second.”

“I’m not saying it’s going to happen, but I wouldn’t be shocked if it did happen, let’s put it that way. If that makes any sense.”

“It does, in Harry-speak.”

That conversation had taken place on the way back from dinner three nights earlier, and all three of them were reminded of it when they saw their British family and friends. When Molly wasn’t looking at them, they shared a collective smile.

They spent a couple of hours outside, walking around the campus, just chatting away, before Fred and George had to get back to the Dining Hall so that they could march out with the rest of the Seniors. Warrick got his Quidditch tips from Charlie, and Molly spent most of her time chatting with Sophie, wanting to get to know her better. She was particularly interested in Sophie’s ongoing relations with her parents, and she ‘tut-tutted’ quite a bit, and there were lots of ‘you poor dear’ in there as well. Harry and Bill talked about nothing but Dumbledore, as Bill had resumed his attendance at Order meetings. They continued these conversations on the way to, and inside, the Athletic Field.

A Great Lakes graduation was no different in most respects than a muggle one. The 50 members of the Senior Class marched in individually as their names were announced in alphabetical order, and went up to Murray in the center of the field. She handed them their diplomas with a smile and a handshake. Fred and George were 47th and 48th in line, and Murray shared a laugh with both, as Harry and the gang, along with the Brit visitors all rose and put on Sonorus:

“WE LOVE YOU FRED!”

“WE LOVE YOU GEORGE!”

Fourteen voices screaming in Sonorus are very, very loud. Even in a large stadium like this one. The twins loved the gesture though, and shouted back the same.

“I LOVE YOU TOO!”

“I LOVE YOU TOO!”

A lot of parents and family members were kicking themselves for not doing the same for their loved ones, and it would become a tradition in future years of Great Lakes graduations. One more bit of spice that the Brits added to the Great Lakes mix.

Valedictorian Jennifer Keller gave a brief speech afterward, one she had been working on for a couple of months now, and refined during the last week after she had been told that she had held on to the number one rank in her class, one that she had first seized at the halfway point of her Transition year. The speech touched on heroism, responsibility, and mentioned her dead boyfriend Ryan Chappelle and his close friend Arthur Hailey in loving memory at the end. The speech lasted less than five minutes, but there were many wet eyes, and lots of thoughtful looks on faces in the crowd during and after she was done speaking. Keller, bound for The University of Chicago in the Fall, was also the top Senior scorer in the Olympics, and was in the top five in her class in every one of her subjects. Her speech was eloquent and poignant, and later that night, Harry would watch it again out of a pensive memory and copy it down word for word. For future use perhaps. He made a point of walking up to her afterward, as everyone went back to campus. Keller was a WWW customer, and they knew each other to say hello.

“That was magnificent Jennifer, the best speech I’ve ever heard anywhere.”

“Thank you Harry, I appreciate that. You’ll give a good one next year.” Harry gently shook his head.

“That’ll be Reiko, but I’ll make sure that it’s in the same ballpark as yours. My family didn’t have many dry eyes in the stands, it was very moving. Good luck in school, and with everything.”

“You too Harry, you too.” They shook hands warmly, and Harry went back to the gang.

“That really did something to you, didn’t it?” Bill answered for Harry.

“We British have a weakness for great oratory Sophie. Henry V, Churchill, they’re just a drop in the bucket. That girl has some potential, I hope she keeps at that kind of thing.”

“No Wizards have ever been King?”

“No, but rumor has it that Prince William has shown signs. We don’t know though, Dumbledore claims that no records are kept of who doesn’t answer, or turns down, the Hogwarts letter that we all got.”

“Maybe he never got it.” The Weasleys and friends all started laughing. Angelina stopped laughing first and explained.

“As Harry here can tell you, nothing stops the letter. How many did you wind up getting?”

“Somewhere north of 1,000.”

“That’s a rough estimate, it would have been a lot more if Hagrid hadn’t come to get him.”

“Oh they tried to duck the letters, but they kept finding us. I was wondering if Vernon would somehow get us on Mir or something to avoid them.” This was a function of how Harry had matured over the months: that he was able to joke about Vernon Dursley. He couldn’t do it without an accompanying insult as recently as six months ago. Periodically it would come up at Order meetings, whether to give additional protection to the Dursleys, but it was always shouted down, led by any younger Weasleys in attendance. They didn’t know

whether Harry had any plans for his vile relatives, but they didn't know that he didn't either.

The Brits stayed for dinner, and then took the portkey back home right after, it being well after midnight in England when they left. The gang was scheduled to leave the next morning bright and early on the 8:00 am flight from Chicago. They all stayed in the trunk that night in a giant slumber party of sorts. Marie Ford stayed for the party, but otherwise wanted one last nightly talk with her roommates, all of whom she was pretty close with. Likewise Rick and Terry, with attendant girlfriends, made appearances, and they had gone in and bought a couple of nice gifts for Dobby and Winky, appreciating the clean room and great Dining Hall food that came with it. Everyone was packed up, and they would portkey to Flackter Alley at 6:00 am so that they could floo to the Greyhound station nearest to O'Hare Airport, and take a taxi from there. Before they turned out the lights, all nine of them lying in sleeping bags on the floor, Fred had a question for Harry.

"Are you sure we're leaving without a final prank?"

"Positive, the faculty is laying for us, or so Riley told me." He got up and turned out the lights, as if in emphasis.

"Laying for us? I thought they liked what we did?"

"They do, they're looking to prank us back, give us a taste of our own medicine. They have a taste for collective amusement too. That's why I insisted that we all sleep down here tonight, there's no way they can get at us."

"So we should plan on our room being a mess when we get up there I guess."

"Dobby and Winky will go up in a few hours and check for booby traps. Heck, I'm half tempted to have us skip those tickets and floo back from right here."

“That would be giving a lot away, better to take the plane ride, too many unanswered questions. Besides, Fred and I have never been on a plane before.” Warrick cleared his throat.

“I haven’t either, I’ve never used anything but floo powder and portkeys to leave Indianapolis.”

That closed it for Harry.

“How could we deny these firsts to our fellow Marauders.”

“It’s really 13 hours?”

“No, that was my trip over here, because of the layover. This one is 10 hours, since its direct from O’Hare to Heathrow.” Fred sounded dubious.

“That’s a long time to be cooped up in some metal tube.”

“You’ll get used to it. Besides, I already paid for the tickets.”

“How much did you wind up paying?”

“Jonas’ dad scammed them for us through some contact he had, so it was only about \$8,000 for the lot of them.” Gasps could be heard throughout the room, though that was a great deal for nine first class tickets from Chicago to London. Harry didn’t ask about the details of the ‘connections’, and Michael Steele wasn’t telling.

“You shouldn’t be spending that kind of money.” They were next to each other, Harry and Sophie, and he proceeded to do something with his fingers that made her giggle, as he addressed her concern out loud.

“I can do whatever I want Sophie dearest, though I love you for saying that. We’ll portkey back here in August, that’s about 1/10 of the cost. I got a letter from Gringotts the other day, and despite how much money I’ve burned through in the last 12 months, I still have

more galleons in my various vaults than I started with last year when I first started plotting.....and that doesn't even count the money I inherited from Sirius." That information had been greeted with the longest sigh of relief in Harry's short life. Professional Quidditch and a nice income was only a year away, if he made it that long.

"Don't get the idea that you'll spend even more now that you've found that out."

"Nah, I'll save so that I can buy a house wherever you decide to go to university, rather than rent."

"One that will fit all of us? That's pretty big." Speaking of all of them:

"Drew, you don't have to live in some dorm or anything in the Auror Academy do you?"

"No, we can sleep wherever we want, as long as we're there for the classes and exercises."

"What are your odds now?"

"Probably 50/50 right now. I'll apply and everything to our college list, and then we'll see. Mom is going to decide by Christmas she says. I can live in the house either way, assuming we get a floo installed."

"Oh we will, I'll need it to get to Quidditch practice. That'll be installed on the first day we're there, if not before."

The lights out discussion continued on for another hour, talking about Godric's Hollow and who would live in which room. They would be spending Sunday night at the shop, probably all but Fred and George sleeping in the trunk as they were now. Then the trial, and following that, the moving in to Godric's Hollow along with the five other DOM's, as well as Lee, Angelina, and Alicia.

It turned out that the room was not booby-trapped, much to everyone's disappointment when they came up from the trunk. They all signed their release papers, and were off to Chicago. The plane

trip went off without a hitch, and the twins only complained a little bit about being cooped up like that. They took three taxis over to Diagon Alley, and the American gang members got their first look at it, in the dark anyway. It was late though, and they would save the tour for after the trial. They went to bed relatively late for Britain, relatively early for Michigan. Harry in particular would have a big day coming up Monday.

Monday, June 30, 1997

Office of the Minister of Magic

8:30 am

The trial of Delores Umbridge was less than an hour away, and Rufus had asked Harry to meet him in his office to discuss a few things ahead of time. He took Sophie along with him, he assumed that Travis would be there, and he wanted her to meet him again, and The Minister too. The others were coming for the trial, Arthur having promised to secure enough seats for them. The shop would be run by Lee and Claudia for the morning, as all other Weasleys and friends were potential witnesses. Harry knocked on the door, and was bade to come in by Rufus himself. He and Sophie entered the large office, only to find out it wasn't just Rufus and Travis, though they were there.

The DOM gang was all assembled, along with special guest Draco Malfoy. They, along with Harry, would be the prime witnesses against Umbridge. Harry paused in the doorway for a moment before Sophie nudged him a little and closed the door behind them. As none of the other Hogwarts kids seemed to be willing to say anything, Draco took a step forward, and in his best Draco drawl:

“Why hello Potter, long time no see.”

Not a good idea upon retrospect.

Harry whipped out his wand and his left hand at the same time and pointed them toward Draco:

“Accio Wand!” “Mobilicorpus!”

His wandless hand took delivery of Draco's wand, which wasn't out in fact and flew from his pocket. Harry's wand took hold of his old enemy and redirected him quickly and violently into a wall, where he pinned him there. Harry flipped the captured wand to Sophie and flashed his palm right at Draco's stomach, the other young man was already gasping for breath.

“Repulsar!”

The Pulse Spell slammed into Draco's gut like a hard punch, as Harry walked the 12 feet between them. Harry's voice remained calm, almost friendly.

“You have no idea how long I've dreamt of this Draco, almost six years I've thought of what to do with you if I caught you like this. No Snape to protect you, no Dumbledore to protect Snape. Just you and I.”

Draco was still gasping for breath, but managed a weak:

“You swore an oath.”

“The oath was not to kill you Draco you bloody moron! Nothing in the papers, and I studied them very hard before and after I signed them, prevents me from merely hurting you.” Sophie just stood there, half-smiling. She had seen enough pensieve memories of Draco that she had no interest in interfering, well not on Draco's side at least.

The DOM's had watched all of this with a mounting sense of horror.....well, not Ron and Neville, who were mentally flogging themselves for not thinking of the same thing. They walked in front of the three girls, standing before their wand paths, though all five of their wands were still pocketed, even though Luna in particular wouldn't lift a finger to help Draco. Harry had acted so quickly that Draco had been against the wall before anyone could blink.

Rufus and Travis were just standing there doing nothing, they had agreed beforehand that it was better for Harry to do something like this in privacy, rather than in a crowded courtroom. It had happened just as they had speculated it would. Travis kept one eye peeled on his fellow countrymen the entire time, just in case. Draco continued to be pinned against the wall, though Harry had not done anything else to him.....yet.

“Potter, don’t do anything rash.” Draco’s eyes were wide with fear though.

“Rash means not thinking ahead, panicking, taking chances. I don’t do that anymore Draco, I’ve learned lessons that you couldn’t possibly comprehend. Five years Draco, five years of abuse abetted by your two thugs and that greaseball!! Did you think I’d forgotten!?” He slammed another Pulse Spell, this time in the abdomen. Hermione felt like she should say something here, though she was cognizant of the fact that Sophie had two wands loosely in her hands, though not pointed at any one person.

“Harry, please. You’ve made your point. Don’t stoop to his level.” He ignored her.

“All because I didn’t shake your hand on the train. All because I picked Ron over you.”

“You did what you thought was right at the time, so did I.”

“You only turned because you had no other play.”

Um, speaking of rash.....

“The same reason you fled! At least I didn’t tuck tail and run!” Ron, very wisely, did not move a muscle upon hearing this, and thus was not hexed into the next century.

Harry’s hand reached out and he mumbled something.....and Draco started choking. More than one teenager gulped at seeing that,

and Ron reflexively touched his own throat as well. Harry's voice continued to be quietly menacing.

"As soon as I saw Star Wars, I wanted to learn that spell. Your grandparents' library was so useful Draco. When you eventually get sent to hell, please thank them for me, it's so comprehensive."

This was getting a bit out of hand, and Hermione stepped between Ron and Neville, right hand at her side. Sophie raised both wands at her.

"Don't even think about it Hermione. This is their fight, let them settle it." Harry didn't take his eyes off Draco.

"Thank you Sophie. Now Draco, I want you to remember this little lesson. Remember that I am not to be trifled with, not to be mocked. Not to be betrayed in any way. Remember Draco, and further such lessons can be avoided." Just before Malfoy was about to pass out from asphyxiation, Harry took the Choking Curse off of him, and threw him to the ground, hard. He remained conscious though, and did not hit anything sharp-ish that would have made him bleed. Harry took a few deep breaths, and turned to Rufus, though his eyes still had a touch of wildness.

"Minister, I apologize for that unseemly display." It was said in a respectful tone, and Rufus nodded at him.

"Apology accepted Harry. Sophie, if I may call you that, if you wouldn't mind giving me Draco's wand, I'll hold on to it for awhile." Sophie had nodded that of course he could use her first name, and was not the least bit surprised that he knew who she was.

"Yes Minister." She walked to them and handed it over. Rufus looked over at Draco, who had no permanent injuries, and barely any temporary ones.

"Thank you Sophie, it's a pleasure to meet you at last. Harry, I trust that you have vented sufficiently, and will not need to dispense any more lessons to Draco without provocation?"

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Draco? I believe that everyone in the room can attest that you deserved that. Am I right?” Malfoy got to his feet unsteadily. He knew that no one in this room was favorably disposed towards him, at least not against Harry, and he acted accordingly.

“All right. I should have made the oaths more detailed. My fault for being sloppy. I won’t underestimate you again.....Harry.” He looked Harry straight in the eye, there would be no ceremonial handshake here. Not that Harry was interested in such a gesture, he looked at his old foe with undisguised contempt.

“See that you don’t Draco.” Rufus now felt that he should take control of the situation, as there was a knock on the door. Coming inside now was Amelia Bones, and both Rufus and Travis were grateful that their by-the-book colleague hadn’t seen Harry’s Darth Vader display.

“Now that we have old quarrels out of the way, I want to make sure that everyone has their stories straight. Harry, with all that’s been going on, with Auror recruitment and all, Madam Bones couldn’t come over there to have a chat with you. I thought we might do that here and now.”

“Fine by me Minister, I’m at your disposal.” Pleased that Harry was so agreeable, the lot of them sat down and did a 30 minute review of Umbridge’s time at Hogwarts. This kind of thing was not illegal under Wizard Law.....which itself was not so much a code, as it was a tradition of doing things. The Wizengamot would deal with judging guilt and do the sentencing anyway. Harry and Draco both behaved themselves during this time, everyone in the room wanted Umbridge put away for good, even Draco. As the meeting broke up, and everyone started to leave, Rufus held Harry back for a moment.

“One last chance to take my offer from before Harry.” Harry smiled, he was hip to The Minister’s psychological maneuvers and quite enjoyed the challenge.

“No thank you sir. But if she tries to make a break for it, I’ll make sure she goes down hard.” Rufus looked like he wouldn’t mind something like that happening.

“I have no doubt.” The two of them left, and Harry fell in next to Sophie. The other DOM’s were at the end of the corridor waiting for them.

“He made the offer again?”

“Yeah, I said no.” Harry had told Sophie, reluctantly, about the Umbridge offer last week. She had been just as appalled as he had figured she would be, particularly after he showed her the pensieve memory of the meeting. The memory did show that Harry had turned it down somewhat quickly though, or at least he hadn’t hemmed and hawed out loud.

Draco was waiting with the DOM’s.

“So did you get it out of your system Harry? Are we at least going to be civil to one another now?” Harry stopped for a second, and wound up addressing Ron and Hermione more than Draco.

“Sure Draco, we’re fine. Just remember the horrible things I’ll do to you if you turn on us in any way, shape, or form. You see, the difference between me and your old Master is this: He tortures people for fun, and doesn’t discriminate between his enemies, his supposed allies, and random people. I won’t hesitate to hurt my enemies, and no one but. If I catch Pettigrew, or your daddy for that matter, I’ll hurt them for sure. But I won’t be laughing while I do it. That’s what makes me better Draco, that’s how I can sleep at night.” He walked past Malfoy, careful not to make contact with him, as Sophie and the others followed him into the courtroom. The DOM’s and company all sat in the third row, with Harry on one end and Draco on the other, with the rest of the gang sitting a couple of rows behinds, wands at

the ready. Draco was sitting next to Ginny and whispered something to her, she then passed it to Luna, then Neville, and so on til it got to Hermione, who told Sophie and Harry both.

“He says ‘fair enough’ Harry.”

“Thanks Hermione.”

“Do you feel better, having gotten that across your chest?” Said in that Hermione voice that Harry occasionally missed, though not a whole lot.

“Your boyfriend is kicking himself that he didn’t do the same thing months ago Hermione.” Sophie had been watching them, and had muttered words to that effect while they were entering the courtroom. Hermione leaned over a little more, and quieted her voice.

“I know he is Harry, that doesn’t make it right.”

“It’s not about right or wrong my old friend, sometimes we have to be human.” Her rejoinder was delayed awhile by Rufus’ entry in the room.

“Let this trial commence. Bring in the defendant.” Harry closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths as Umbridge was led into the courtroom. After she and her Auror minders got inside, the doors were magically sealed shut. It would take a lot of fire to get them open from the outside, and the walls in the re-built Courtroom Orion were enhanced like crazy, personally overseen by Orion Gatsby himself. Far from being horrified by the damage during the Malfoy trial, he had been rather pleased at getting a second chance at things, with the attendant extra money of course. Another security feature, the spectator list was limited to 50 people, not counting the witnesses. Sophie and the other gang members were six of that number, all of them at their first trial of any kind, except for Drew, whose mother was a lawyer and politician.

Umbridge did not look at Harry or anyone else as she was marched in. She took her seat and stared hard at The Minister, who simply winked at her and continued his spiel. He was going to enjoy this.

“The defendant, Dolores Umbridge, is present and has chosen to represent herself. Representing the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is Madam Amelia Bones. Madam Bones, would you please read the charges.”

“Yes Minister. The defendant is charged with abuse of authority, attempted use of an Unforgiveable Curse, use of torture on a minor, defamation, and aggravated assault on Ministry personnel.” That last one was for ordering the attack on McGonagall, who was technically a government employee.

“Thank you Madam Bones. Ms. Umbridge, how do you plead?” Umbridge, who had been a guest in a Ministry holding cell, not Azkaban, for the last two months, rose from her chair.

“Not guilty on all counts.”

“Very well. You are still insistent upon representing yourself?” To everyone’s surprise, she was not insisting on Veritaserum for all of the prosecution witnesses. Rufus had no intention of granting such a request, but it was still unexpected that she skipped it.

“I am, but I would like to protest that Minister Fudge has not been made available. It will be hard to mount a defense without him, as he was responsible for giving me my orders.” Rufus just smiled at her, they had gone round and round on this last week.

“Your protest has been noted, and FORMER Minister Fudge is in parts unknown at the moment, and has not exactly rushed back here to defend you. Do you wish to change your plea?” Rufus was largely responsible for Fudge not being able to sally forth in aid, but he felt that those details would just cloud the current issues.

“No I do not Mr. Scrimgeour.” A bit of a gasp at hearing that, but Rufus just chuckled and moved on. Fudge probably would have had smoke coming out of his ears.

“Madam Bones, please call your first witness.”

“Thank you Minister, our first witness is Minerva McGonagall.” McGonagall rose and assumed the witness chair.

“Please state your name and occupation please.”

“Minerva McGonagall, Transfiguration Professor and Deputy Headmistress at Hogwarts.”

“How long have you known the defendant.”

“Upwards of thirty years.”

“When was the last time you saw her before today?”

“A little over a year ago, right before she ordered Ministry personnel to kill me.”

“Yet here you are alive.”

“They underestimated me.”

Bones then led McGonagall through the events of 1995-6 Hogwarts' school year in detail. She acknowledged that she had not known about the blood quills used against Lee and Harry, nor was she intimate with the details of Dumbledore's Army, though she knew about it in broad strokes. She freely admitted leading the faculty in their attempts to undermine Umbridge, and the DOM's found out a lot of interesting details about how all of that had come about. Bones' examination took over an hour, and McGonagall looked a little talked out by the time it was over. Umbridge rose from her seat, she was not in chains or anything of the like, not being charged with a capital crime.

“Ms. McGonagall, was not my every action preceded by an Education Decree from The Ministry?”

“No.”

“Really? Name one thing that was not.” There were many in fact, but McGonagall chose an easy one.

“Your suspension of Harry Potter, Fred Weasley, and George Weasley after the first Quidditch game of the season.”

“Hardly an egregious punishment, after they attacked a student.”

“I would have handled things differently, and it was my right to, being their Head of House at the time.”

“Yet you are not their Head of House now are you?”

“What difference does that make here?”

“Indulge me.” Bones didn’t object, not seeing the harm.

“The Weasley twins graduated from school the day before yesterday, no one is their Head of House. You don’t get The Daily Prophet in your cell?”

“Yet they did not choose to return to Hogwarts after my expulsion of them was overturned.”

“That’s not for me to say, I was not consulted on their change of schools.” Everyone in the courtroom was looking at Fred and George right now. They had not been in on the meeting with Rufus, and were sitting with Lee, one row behind the DOM’s and Draco, and one row in front of the rest of the gang.

“I have no doubt. Just one final reminder: I had Ministry Educational Decrees for the vast majority of my actions, including all the so-called crimes that I am charged with.”

“You technically had Ministry approval, but as I testified, you exceeded your mandate on nearly every occasion.” Umbridge still smiled as if her point had been confirmed.

“I’m finished with this person.” McGonagall left the witness stand, and she made a point of making eye contact with Harry. She nodded slightly at him, they were allies on this one mission.

“Your next witness Madam Bones.”

“The DMLE calls Lee Jordan.” Lee made the walk up, trying hard not to look at Umbridge directly.

“Please state your name and occupation for the record.”

“Lee Major Jordan, floor manager Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes.”

“Mr. Jordan, would you please walk over to the Wizengamot and show them the back of your right hand?”

“Yes ma’am.” Lee rose from the witness stand, and walked over to Dumbledore and his colleagues. He showed them the scars on the back of his hand, ones that had only faded a little bit. Lee, like Harry, had not had St. Mungo’s attempt to do anything to fade them further, hoping that they would be useful in a situation like this.

“Mr. Jordan, how did you come to acquire those scars?”

Lee told his story, and the Wizengamot members were visibly horrified. Bones finished with him in less than 10 minutes, and Umbridge took over.

“Jordan, you were made to write with that quill because you were telling lies were you not?”

“I was telling the truth.”

“You were directly contravening a Ministry approved position were you not?”

“I was telling the truth.”

“You deliberately violated the law and you were punished!”

“I have no new information since the last time you asked me that question.” That caused some titters in the crowd, and Rufus cracked a brief grin.

“I’m done with him.” Lee left the stand, and the look of hatred on his face could be seen from the back of the courtroom.

The remainder of the morning was spent with the Hogwarts faculty, and Fred and George. No bombshells were dropped, as teacher after teacher admitted to how they subtly undermined Umbridge after months of grimacing and bearing her behavior and orders. Fred and George described in detail how they had ‘left the building’, to the amusement of most everyone in the room. Even Dumbledore could be seen chuckling during a few points, and he had heard the entire story from them at the first Summer meeting of the Order.

Lunch was brief, only 30 minutes, as Rufus anticipated something heinous in the air, and wanted the trial to get over with as soon as possible. Ministry house-elves on staff distributed sandwiches and drinks, and few people left the courtroom. Umbridge was led out though, and Ron took the opportunity to walk over to Harry, and in a low voice:

“How many galleons to get you to teach me that Choking Spell? I’m not saying I’ll go over a 100 galleons a year for the rest of my life, but I might.” Harry and Sophie both broke up at hearing that, and the twins behind them were grinning too.

“101 galleons a year for life and I might think about it Ron.”

“That was bloody amazing. Hermione whispered to me what Star Wars meant, sounds pretty cool.”

“We’ll watch it tonight if you want, Warrick’s the electronics man, he’ll set up the TV.”

“Great. How do you think it’s going so far?”

“She’s history, Lee alone was enough to put her away.”

“Do you think she’ll try something? An escape?” Harry looked around before answering.

“I really hope so Ron, I really hope so.” They shared a smile, and for a moment a lot of crap was forgotten between them.

“Me too mate, make her suffer.”

The trial recommenced at 12:30, and the first of the DOM’s came up: Luna.

Luna really wasn’t involved much until The Quibbler article came out with Harry’s version of the Voldemort mess. Bones got through her testimony in less than 15 minutes and tendered her over. Umbridge looked as though she was afraid of getting anywhere near someone as odd as Luna, and only had a few questions.

“So you admit to suborning lies when you encouraged your father to print that article in his rag?”

“He prints a newspaper, not a rag. I don’t think you could read rags very well, they wouldn’t go through the printing press very easily.”

“Answer the question.”

“Well ask one that makes sense and I’ll be happy to.” Ah Luna. Drew was now officially in love, though he did really like Marie Ford.

“Did you or did you not encourage your father to print Potter’s lies?!”

“Yes I did encourage him to publish Harry’s story, though Daddy does as he pleases.” Luna’s father, though in the crowd, had not been subpoenaed to testify by either side.....neither side being willing to chance what he might say maybe.

“So you admit to encouraging Potter’s lies?”

“He wasn’t lying.”

“Yes he was!” Bones was immediately on her feet.

“Objection, the defendant is testifying here.”

“Yes she is, please keep your voice down and your facts straight Ms. Umbridge.”

“But.....”

“You heard me. Now if you have no further questions of Miss Lovegood, she can step down. Thank you Miss Lovegood.” This was as close to ‘Shut the hell up and get on with it’ that Rufus would come to, he was a polite man after all. Luna, the normal one in this situation for once, eased out of the witness chair and took the long way around Umbridge.

“I object to this!!”

“Overruled, Madam Bones call your next witness. And the next time you raise your voice to me Ms. Umbridge, I will declare this a mistrial and your next go round will be next year, with you spending the interim time in Azkaban. I’m sure you understand me, so I don’t need to ask for confirmation. Madam Bones.” All of this was said in Rufus’ most amiable voice possible, and Travis could be seen with his body shaking, trying not to laugh out loud. Umbridge was nonplussed, and Bones took that opportunity to call her next witness: Hermione.

Hermione didn't have much to add, other than being witness to the scars of Harry and Lee, and other events involving Dumbledore's Army. She was done in 20 minutes, and Umbridge passed on cross examining her. While Hermione had been up there, Harry motioned for Ron to slide over, and he whispered something quickly to him. Ron looked at him for a long moment, and then started nodding and smiling.

"The DMLE calls Ron Weasley to the stand."

Ron passed right next to Umbridge, and as he did, he made clip-clopping sounds with his tongue. Umbridge started violently, and almost fell over in her chair. Ron pretended like he didn't notice this as the entire gallery and Wizengamot started laughing at her. Rufus motioned for everyone to quiet down after about a minute of it, and the audience slowly settled down. Umbridge, mindful that Rufus had never heard of the term 'idle threat', stayed quiet and did not object, though she directed a venomous look at Ron.

Bones could very easily have asked for a stipulation that Ron's testimony would mirror Hermione's, since she asked the same questions and got the same answers. Her strategy though, was to beat the Wizengamot over the head with the evidence, so as to leave no doubt in their minds. Ginny was the same way, as was Neville. Umbridge merely looked bored, and so did a few Wizengamot members. Dumbledore gave Bones a stern look as soon as Neville left the stand, and she nodded at him.

"I next call Draco Malfoy."

Draco was easily the most damaging witness of them all so far, as he testified about the Inquisition Squad, and lent affirmation to the testimonies of the DOM's. This was not part of Draco's overall deal with The Ministry, as it had been hatched and sworn before Umbridge was deemed to be fit for trial. This was a good faith gesture on his part, and appealed to his sense of screwing someone over for the hell of it. One could see Umbridge's shoulders slumping with every detail he talked about, and she didn't cross examine him. Once she

declined to do so, everyone went to the edge of their chairs, Harry would be next.

“The DMLE rests.”

This was a turn.

Gasps reigned in the courtroom, as Bones did not call Harry. Rufus, already mentally planning what he would order for dinner at his favorite restaurant in London, looked over at Umbridge, and in an indifferent tone of voice asked:

“Does the defense wish to call any witnesses?”

“The defense calls Albus Dumbledore.” Rufus looked mildly annoyed, which Travis and Amelia took to mean that he was rapidly losing his temper.

“That request is denied, as you were told three different times before today Ms. Umbridge. Albus Dumbledore is the Head of the Wizengamot that will judge you, and perhaps sentence you. He cannot be called as a witness for or against you.”

“I am being denied my right to a fair trial. Both of my best witnesses are being denied me.”

“I am tired of reminding you that I can’t just snap my fingers and produce a fugitive for your convenience. Now either call a witness, or rest your case.”

“I call Harry Potter.” Harry almost hopped out of his seat right away, but decided to make her wait a few seconds, and then slowly ambled up to the stand, pausing next to Umbridge. She flinched involuntarily, but Harry never made a sound or gesture, and continued up to the stand. The twins and Luna could be heard giggling in the gallery.

“So, the coward returns to Great Britain.” Everyone sucked in their breath, hoping for an explosion.

Harry just yawned. Bones had told him that she would let Umbridge do damage to herself by calling Harry, Bones just knew that she wouldn't resist.

"Well?"

"Aren't you supposed to be asking a question? I've seen enough movies to know that that's what happens in things like this."

"Muggle filth."

Harry yawned again. The gang was looked at him wide-eyed, as they had half expected him to start cursing her the second he laid eyes on her.

"Typical of your lack of respect."

"Lack of respect for who?"

"For your betters!" Harry let out a peal of laughter.

"And you style yourself as my better? Call St. Mungo's lady, you're not quite well enough to be put on trial." He was warming to his task, which was to make her snap so that he could have some magical fun with her.

"Insolence!" Harry turned to Rufus.

"I stipulate a yawn to every stupid thing like that she says." Rufus liked that.

"So stipulated."

"I will not be disrespected this way!"

"Minister, was she yelling at you or at me? Because if she was yelling at you, then off to Azkaban she goes."

“I think she was yelling at you Harry, sorry.”

“Dang it. Um, you were saying defendant?” Umbridge had indeed become a little discombobulated, and she took a moment to collect her thoughts.

“Why did you flee Britain like a coward?” Bones was on her feet.

“Objection, that has no relevance here, Mr. Potter did not leave the country until almost a month after the defendant was remanded to St. Mungo’s for mental instability, so it has no relevance what so ever to the events in question here.” Umbridge was getting pretty good at this flinching business, but this time she was undeterred..

“Oh but it does, it goes to his credibility.”

“Your close friend Lucius Malfoy thought the same way during his trial.”

“Answer the question!”

“What was the question again?” Umbridge stalked forward until she was about five feet away.

“You little traitor, you’ll get what you deserve.”

“And what do I deserve?”

“A cruel death.”

Harry smiled, and turned to Rufus.

“I want the record to reflect that the defendant has just threatened my life, and under ancient Wizarding law I am well within my rights to challenge her to a duel, to the death or not.”

Umbridge had never actually seen Harry in combat before, and had little respect for his abilities. Most people in the room had been

around for Lucius' trial, or had read about both it and the Lycan invasion, so while they probably would have wet themselves at such a challenge, she did not.

"You're not fit to duel anyone you worthless brat."

"Minister, I think we need a ruling here." Rufus pondered this for a moment, he hadn't thought Umbridge would snap so easily, or that Harry would go for the jugular this quickly.

"Madam Bones, please come up here for a moment." She did, and they leaned close.

"Well Amelia? Do we let him butcher her for our collective amusement?" Bones had her limits, and this situation was hitting every one of them.

"Oh come on Minister, that hardly qualifies as a threat. Look, I would love to sit back and watch Potter gut her like a prize hog, but it's not about what you and I want. We have to have the appearance of justice, not simply justice itself." Rufus gave her a 'you spoil sport' look, but gave in nonetheless.

"All right, that seems reasonable." Reassured that Rufus was not going to have Umbridge murdered right there in the courtroom, Bones went back to her spot on the floor, and The Minister addressed the masses.

"This trial will go forward as planned and uninterrupted. Ms. Umbridge, you will not raise your voice to anyone, nor will you insult them without direct provocation. If you continue to behave in such a childish manner, I will end your defense and the case will be immediately given over to the jury for final disposition. Am I in any way unclear Ms. Umbridge?" Said in Rufus' normal friendly voice, but the message was unmistakable. During her time as Senior Undersecretary, Umbridge had made the occasional attempt at getting rid of Rufus, then Head Auror, but Fudge had always shot her down. He maintained that he needed talented people in his administration, and that he couldn't afford to let them get away. It

should also be noted that Rufus had never accepted the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts, despite yearly offers from Dumbledore, who was often times scraping the same barrel year after year.

“You are not unclear Mr. Scrimgeour.”

“ That’s Minister Scrimgeour, your beloved Cornelius was impeached lawfully and correctly by the Wizengamot. You of all people should understand respect for The Ministry and its leaders. Now continue on with your examination of Harry, with my earlier warnings fully in mind.” Everyone in the room was noting Rufus’ casual use of Harry’s first name, rather than ‘Mr. Potter’.

“Potter, why did you flee Great Britain?”

“I did not flee.”

“You have not been residing in The United States for the last 11 months?”

“I have.”

“So you admit to lying.”

“No I do not admit to that. I left, I did not flee. I took a muggle airplane, without the slightest disguise, to my destination in muggle Wisconsin. There were just shy of a dozen different Wizards and Witches who knew I was leaving, when I was leaving, and where I was going, including but not limited to then Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge. I did not flee, I left.” That was said more to the assembled court members than Umbridge, but he got the point across. It helped that Rufus looked very ready to say something, and the hag knew that it would not be to her benefit to let him speak just then.

“Fine then, why did you leave?”

“I wanted a better education than I was getting, and a safer one.”

“And you wanted to escape retribution for your lies.” Said as a statement, not a question, and Harry took it as such.

“What lies would those be? Are you the only person left in magical Britain that denies the return of Voldemort?”

“I am not here to answer your questions.”

“No, you’re here on trial for more crimes than I have fingers to count them on.”

“Yet again, you have not answered the question.”

“What was the question again?” This time Harry actually couldn’t remember. Umbridge finally got things around to actual questions regarding her case.

“Did you, or did you not, illegally form an organization called Dumbledore’s Army?” Hermione had covered most of this during her testimony, but Umbridge wanted to hear it from Harry it seemed.

“I direct you to Hermione Granger’s answer to that question, I have nothing to add to it.”

“Answer the question.” He shrugged theatrically, playing to the crowd a little.

“Fine, Hermione was the impetus behind Dumbledore’s Army, and the reason it began.....but I acknowledge to the court that I could have stopped it if I had really wanted to, with nothing more than my non-participation.”

“Against Ministry policy.”

“Yes.” Umbridge was slightly taken aback at Harry’s first time agreeing with her.

“So you admit to treason against the lawful government?”

“I admit to forming a Defense Against the Dark Arts study group, nothing more. I think calling it treason is a little much.”

“You deliberately broke the law!”

“And I remind you that you are on trial here, not me. Then Minister Fudge had plenty of opportunities this summer to punish me, instead he gave me my emancipation. Hardly the actions of a Minister toward a supposed traitor.” The crowd was hanging on every word now.

“You blackmailed him somehow.”

“You should have heard the names he called you, it would turn your hair white. He was not very complimentary toward you I must say.” This was stretching the truth a little, but there was no Veritaserum here, and Harry thought that the court members might enjoy seeing Umbridge blow a gasket.

“Insolence.” At least she didn’t yell this time.

“Says you. Look defendant, everyone in the room knows we hate each other, can we please get on with this and spare the room the repetitious examples of that hate?” The looks on the collective faces of the Wizengamot seemed to second, third, and fortieth that notion, even Dumbledore was nodding his head in apparent agreement. Umbridge was only three meters away from Harry, if that, as she didn’t seem to know that to say.

Umbridge then did something that was very.....well one isn’t sure what to call it, rash doesn’t seem to do it justice. She walked up to Harry and smacked him across the face, open handed.

WHACK!

She packed a wallop for someone of her size, and Harry's head snapped back. The courtroom was silent for a moment, and then it exploded into shouting and screaming.

All but Harry, who now had a 'I didn't realize it was my birthday' look on his face, as he leapt out of his seat and began advancing on a rapidly retreating Umbridge, his wand wasn't out yet.....though that was a mere formality with his quick draw and rate of fire capability. Rufus immediately rose to his feet and put his wand to his throat.

“EVERYONE SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP RIGHT NOW!”

It was said in his normal tone of voice, but the Sonorus Charm was quite loud in the relatively confined space of the courtroom. Everyone did as instructed except for Harry, who was now just two meters from Umbridge, who was more than a little frightened of the look on her former student's face.

“Harry, stop.”

Harry turned toward The Minister, who had taken the wand off his throat when speaking to him.

“Now I really want that duel. I'll very gladly save the taxpayers of magical Britain the cost of feeding this hag for the next 20 years.” His voice was quiet, but still menacing, and Dumbledore was very graphically having Tom Riddle flashbacks. He stayed rooted to his seat though, as he had a feeling that this was a defining moment for Harry. He could see the rage wanting to be let out, as Harry had one of his foes within his grasp.....with only Rufus Scrimgeour stopping him. The man himself quickly turned his attention to Umbridge, then Dumbledore.

“Delores Umbridge, your defense is hereby terminated, and a charge of physical assault is added to the laundry list. Headmaster, the case is now yours, and I expect your body to deliberate with all due speed. You may go.” The Wizengamot filed out, and as soon as they were gone, Rufus pointed to two of his Aurors.

“Get that thing back to her holding cell.” They quickly dragged Umbridge away, sensing that Harry was about to snap any second now, and that the kid probably wasn’t going to be too discerning when he threw curses around. Umbridge herself was protesting now, feeling safe enough to complain that she hadn’t done anything wrong. Her protests could be heard until the door behind her was securely shut.

Rufus came down from his throne and walked right up to Harry, whispering something in his ear as Travis Biller came over as well, catching the muted conversation.

“If they set her free, I guarantee that you’ll get your revenge Harry, and I mean today. I’ll make sure of that, you have my word.” Harry had calmed down now and directed his gaze at his erstwhile ally, who held his eyes level with Harry’s.

“All right then, I have your word. If she somehow survives Azkaban, I’ll be waiting for her the moment she reaches the mainland again, you have my word on that.” Rufus and Travis shared a small smile, this had been what they both hoped for.

“I would have been disappointed if you had said anything less Harry. Please go take your seat, I can’t see this lasting too long, we need to keep the lid on for just a little while longer here.”

“As you wish Minister.” Harry returned to his spot in the pew, and Sophie and Hermione, the ones closest to him in that pew, seemed to be afraid to say anything, as muted conversation in the rest of the crowd began again. Fred had no such qualms though.

“Would you have killed her, or just sent her to St. Mungo’s?” Harry smiled, his first one since the slap.

“I was just going to deck her is all. I’m small, but I could have laid her out with one punch I think.” That relaxed everyone within hearing, and chatter amongst them resumed as well. The twins and Lee leaned over the pew as Drew and the rest of the gang crowded around on Harry’s side of it as well. They chatted away about the trial,

as Rufus and Travis stood near The Minister's throne and watched them.

"You know Travis, that's the future of magical Britain and America right over there."

"What I wouldn't give to see them take on a couple dozen Death Eaters." Both men smiled at that.

"I know what you mean my friend, I know what you mean."

"How long do you think they'll be out?" The Wizengamot he meant.

"An hour tops. Anyone voting not guilty will only be doing so in hope of seeing Harry and the twins lynch her right in front of us." Not an unpleasant thought for either man, as unprofessional as it might sound to an outsider. It was probably a good thing that Bones wasn't standing with them. She was off in a corner talking with her brother and niece, the niece being Susan Bones of Hufflepuff. Susan had not testified, even though she was a member of Dumbledore's Army, but her aunt had gotten her and her father floor seats for the gallery just in case.

"You should have let him kill her when you had the chance."

"I know, but we would have lost Amelia. I've made compromises to keep her on board before, I can keep doing so, as long as they're small ones." Losing her to Dumbledore's side wasn't that likely, but all in all Rufus liked having her around to argue with him. Diggory was just a good manager, maybe even a great one, but nothing more. Travis.....well he was in the job he had always wanted, and wanted nothing more than to be his mentor's enforcer. Something he did very, very well in fact, though his diplomatic skills were rapidly improving.

Harry was coming up to them now.

"I'm sorry I forgot to ask Travis, how is little Maya?" Maya Anne Biller was now nine weeks old, and the apple of her father's eye. Her

godparents were Rufus, and Bronte Barratt, Rebecca Biller's Holyhead Harpies teammate and best friend.

"Cranky most of the time, taking after me, or so Rebecca says."

"Keeping you up at night?"

"Shockingly no, she sleeps most nights all the way through. Maybe once a week she wails on through the darkness."

"You must be very proud."

"Oh I am Harry, I am. I'll be more proud once Rebecca gets back to work being the breadwinner of the Biller household." Rebecca Biller's Quidditch salary was roughly twice what her hubby made as a senior government official, something Biller's ego quite enjoyed.

They talked about Quidditch for a little while, until a small house elf popped in next to them.

"Minister Scrimgeour, I have a message from Headmaster Dumbledore." He handed over a small slip of paper, and Rufus read it aloud, trusting his audience:

We are finished with our deliberations and have reached a verdict. We will be there momentarily.

Albus.

"Well, well, at only 20 minutes. Not bad, best that the three of us don't get into the habit of underestimating the old man, if he can pull off tricks like this." He turned to the crowd, none of whom had left the courtroom, though many had moved around to talk with friends and acquaintances.

"Attention everyone. I have just been informed that a verdict has been reached, and that the Wizengamot will be along shortly. Please retake your seats."

“I’ll go get her.”

“Thank you Travis.” The three of them split apart. Harry went back to his seat, as did Rufus. Travis unsealed the door leading to the holding area, and went to get Umbridge. He returned with her in a couple of minutes, beating the Wizengamot back to the courtroom by mere seconds. Umbridge gave Harry a triumphant look, as if she had gotten away with something. The first thing Harry had done after taking his seat after the slap was check himself for any stray charms, and had found nothing. He made a mental note to get checked out at St. Mungo’s the next day, just in case. As soon as the Wizengamot was seated, Rufus addressed them.

“Headmaster Dumbledore, you have reached a verdict on the charges?”

“We have Minister.”

“Please read it.”

Dumbledore rose from his chair and looked directly at his usurper, he had a lot of reading aloud to do. The crowd stayed silent during the entire reading, not wanting to miss a moment.

“Delores Umbridge, on the charge of simple assault of Harry Potter from 30 minutes ago, you are found guilty. Your punishment for that offense is a fine of 2,500 galleons, one half to go into the Ministry’s general fund, one half to the charity of Mr. Potter’s choice.”

“On the charge of assault and attempted murder of Minerva McGonagall, you are found guilty, and sentenced to a term of no less than 10 years in Azkaban.”

“On the multiple charges of torture with a Dark object, a blood quill, you are found guilty. Your sentence is 10 years in Azkaban.”

“On the multiple charges of misuse of Ministry authority, we find you guilty, but acknowledge extenuating circumstances in that you were

following the orders of Cornelius Fudge, then Minister of Magic. Your sentence is two years in a Ministry holding cell.”

“On the count of attempted use of an Unforgivable Curse on a minor, namely Cruciatus, you are found guilty. Your sentence is 10 years in Azkaban.” Attempted Unforgivable on an adult carried half the sentence.

“On the multiple counts of defamation, we find you guilty, but again acknowledge extenuating circumstances, and sentence you to two years in a Ministry holding cell.”

“Your total sentence is 30 years imprisonment in Azkaban, followed by four years in a Ministry holding cell, minus two months of time already served in said cell. Due to your being a flight risk, your sentence is to begin this afternoon. May you learn from your mistakes, and emerge from prison a better person.” Only Dumbledore could get away with saying that, but even he assumed the Umbridge was gone forever. No way would she survive 30 years in Azkaban.

Rufus rose and addressed them, as Umbridge was speechless.

“Members of the Wizengamot, I thank you for your labors today. Delores Umbridge, you will be in your new home before the hour is over. I would normally ask you if you had any last words for us, but you have demonstrated no regard for civility today, so you can just keep your mouth shut. This trial is now concluded, have a good day.” The Minister didn’t move, merely waiting for the courtroom to empty somewhat, as signaled to Harry to remain. Umbridge never regained the power of speech, though it helped that Travis had covertly cast a Muting Charm on her as soon as the verdict was read. Dumbledore and Arthur were the only Wizengamot members to linger. Arthur to see his children, Dumbledore appeared to want to talk with Harry. Rufus forestalled this though.

“Headmaster, you don’t need to remain, I have some things to discuss with Harry and his group.”

“I would like to speak to Harry for a moment if I may.” The Minister looked at Harry, who responded as politely as he could, given whom it was he was talking to.

“Not right now Albus, we have some logistics to work out in here right now. Perhaps sometime next month we can sit down, in a controlled environment, and talk.” In an environment controlled completely by me, Harry was thinking.

Dumbledore opened his mouth to object, but Rufus was looking pointedly at him, so he relented.

“Very well Harry, I look forward to Hedwig coming to deliver a note from you.”

“You may look forward to anything you wish Albus. Good day.” Dumbledore left, slowly, as everyone watched him go. Once the door was shut, the room only held teenagers, Weasleys, and Rufus and Travis. Angelina and Alicia were not there, as they had other commitments, and were not joining in the tutoring.

“Well, now that we have some privacy. Harry, the tutoring will begin tomorrow afternoon at 1:00 pm, giving you the rest of today and tomorrow morning to get used to things in Wales. You all will meet here at The Ministry at that time to meet your instructors. Harry, you have been scheduled for 40 hours per week of tutoring, at your request. Fred, George, you will have 30 hours per week, as you are not protected by a castle or a heavily fortified factory building during the next academic year. The rest of you will receive 20 hours per week, in varying shifts. All of this will be at The Ministry’s expense, as we feel that you lot are in the most danger of anyone in your similar age-groups, and that any Death Eater or werewolf you take down can only help matters for the war. Anything more than 20 hours a week that you would want, you are free to work out arrangements with your instructors. I have a schedule prepared for all of you, that speaks to what we think you should be taught, as well as allowing for WWW to keep operating smoothly.....my nieces and nephews would kill me if I was in any way involved in the shop not functioning.” Fred and George smiled very brightly at this.

“That sounds great Minister, I appreciate you doing this for us.” Murmurs of agreement came from everyone assembled.

“You’re very welcome Harry, and all of you too. Harry, Fred, George, your Dark Force Defense League duties won’t be too taxing I don’t think, the first meeting is this coming Saturday at noon, at The Leaky Cauldron. The meetings are supposed to be somewhat covert, and Tom has a room for things like this. Too many tongues would wag if it was held here, even on a Saturday, and Hogwarts just isn’t suitable.” Really? Harry and the twins had no desire to go there, but they supposed that it was a Rufus/Dumbledore turf kind of thing. Travis cleared his throat, taking a bag out of his pocket and enlarging it.

“Harry, here are a couple dozen portkeys that I made for you, roundtrip ones from Godric’s Hollow to WWW. I made them right after the old man took Fidelius off, and before your secret keeper put it back on. Once you’re down to the last couple, just see me to have some more made.” That the secret keeper was Bill was only known by Harry, Travis, and Rufus officially, and Sophie unofficially, though the other two men just assumed that he would tell her. Harry figured that if Travis or Rufus wanted to screw him over, they would have had plenty of chances already. Besides, he had every intention of doing the Pink on Godric’s Hollow, as well as certain other defenses that he had read about.

“Terrific, we’ll keep these in a safe place to be sure.” It was approaching mid-afternoon by now, and The Minister did have other things on his schedule for the day, so he made to leave.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow for your orientation, and I look forward to chatting with each of you. Take care.” He left, and Biller soon followed him, wanting to see personally to the disposition of Umbridge. Bill and Arthur were the only adult figures around, Molly not wanting to be anywhere near Umbridge. Besides, she was the only one minding the shop at the moment, all other employees being needed here. Bill looked at them.

“Well we should get over there, get you lot moved in and all. Where are all your things?” Harry replied.

“Well the Great Lakes trunks are at the shop, Dobby and Winky will fetch them for us. Are your trunks at The Burrow?” Hermione answered.

“They are, we were hoping to use Dobby and Winky that way too, if its okay.”

“Of course it is, both of them have been chomping at the bit to work in a real house for a change, instead of a dorm room, a trunk, and a shop where anything they touch might explode on them at any second.” Fred looked indignant.

“Hey now, we told them exactly where the danger areas were on their first day.”

“Poor Dobby, giving him that much temptation.” George shrugged.

“Well it was a rocky first week, but he adjusted.”

“What about that time that he came back with his ears three sizes too big?” That had been in March.

“Why are you bringing old stuff?” Sophie gave Harry a poke in the ribs, though everyone was liking the byplay, even Ron was smiling.

“Right, anyway, back to business. Dobby and Winky will look after things around the house, and do the food shopping in Diagon Alley. Some things will have to be bought in muggle London or Cardiff, but that’s nothing we can’t handle. Rooms will be assigned once we get there, we have things to discuss about them.” His small gesture toward Ron and Hermione, not wanting Arthur to hear them say whether or not they would be sharing a room. He was more than a little curious to their answer himself, and decided to get the show on the road.

“Let’s get to the shop then, we can portkey from there.” They took the Ministry’s public floo over to WWW, where the Great Lakes gang decided to pile all their stuff into Harry’s large trunk, saving Dobby and Winky a trip. They gave Molly the five minute report on the trial, after finding that business had been somewhat slow while they were occupied. She seemed fairly impressed that Harry had not turned Umbridge into a puddle of skin and water, though she said little otherwise. Molly knew that she would get the entire story from Arthur when they both got home.

Everyone walked out back to the portkey area that the twins had set up, and soon they were away to their next adventure.

End Chapter.

Author's Note: It turns out that it was Math and Verbal that were the SAT scores way back when, I agree that I should have spent another five minutes on Wikipedia to find this out. In screw-ups news, I had Lee and Claudia minding the shop before the trial, then Lee testifying during the trial with Molly running the shop. Sigh One small note: I've made a small deal of how Harry can tell the twins apart, I should probably say that it's not a mole, which is how the Phelps twins can be told apart. I'm not saying what it is, just what its not. Lastly, I've never been in a house as big as the one I'll be describing for Godric's Hollow, nor am I an architect.....so the design might be construed as original, or harebrained, take your pick.

Monday June 30, 1997 continued

3:00 pm

Godric's Hollow

The group arrived outside the house, and Bill led them up to the door, the first confirmation for most of them that he was the Secret Keeper. For the rational thinkers among the DOM's, Neville and Hermione, this made perfect sense, as Bill was close enough to Harry for the paranoid lad to trust, and also powerful enough to resist Dumbledore if push came to shove. The 'feelers' in the group: Ron, Ginny, and Luna, worshipped Bill anyway.....Luna from afar all these years, in a non-crush kind of way, so they all thought he was a splendid choice as well. The Americans who hadn't officially known just assumed it was Bill by process of elimination, having heard Harry dissect all of the Brits before..

Bill walked up to the door and unlocked it, and they all walked inside, spending very little time outside for the time being. There was a tiny entrance way, which branched off into the main downstairs rooms. To the left was the living room, full of furniture covered with cloth. Clearly Dumbledore had done some straightening up before he put the house under Fidelius.

Ironically, that was the one Dumbledore decision made in that era that Harry totally agreed with. He certainly didn't want this to be some Death Eater memorial or something, a symbol of a great victory. Well,

Voldemort might not consider 13 years in exile a win, but the rest of his crew quietly felt that getting rid of James and Lily Potter had been worth it in the end, whatever their boss' obsession with the offspring. Dumbledore had done the job less than two days after the murders, sending a house elf over every few months to dust and check things over. He himself had not come, finding it all too painful to bear. It had always been his intention, as he had tried to explain to Amos Diggory, to return the property to Harry upon the younger man's adulthood, though he did not recognize the emancipation as part of that. Diggory had just shaken his head at him, and reminded Dumbledore that Harry and Rufus were now official allies, and that bucking one meant bucking the other.

To the direct right of the entrance way was a small study, lined with bookcases from wall to wall. James Potter had not been much of a reader, so this collection was inherited from previous Potters. Lily had only lived here for a little while, so there was very little of her stamp on this room or most others in the house, save the master bedroom. Harry felt a very visceral reaction, just seeing the two rooms out of the corners of his eyes as he looked around. He started to shake a little bit as he took in sights that he hadn't seen in almost 16 years.

Sophie noticed it first, she could feel his hand vibrating a little bit.

"Harry? What's wrong?" Everyone turned to look at them.

"I can almost feel them, Mum and Dad."

"Just take a deep breath, let it all sink in a little." Harry did just that, and though he was still shaking a hair bit, he managed to think of something else. In a mostly normal tone of voice:

"Fred, George, please go upstairs and do some scanning. We need to make sure that Dumbledore didn't leave anything behind. Bill and I will do it down here." Arthur had stayed behind with Molly at WWW, and the four of them were the only ones comfortable with the Scanning Spell.

“Right mate, let’s go Fred.” The twins found the staircase and went up to do their work.

“Sorry Harry, I should have thought of that before I put the house back under.”

“No worries Bill, I doubt we’ll find anything, but it pays to be careful.”

“ You don’t think he left anything? It sure sounds like the Dumbledore you’ve been describing.”

“Yeah it does Jonas, except for one tiny detail: The house has been under Fidelius for almost 16 years, so why would there be a need for Surveillance Charms? He knows I would do a check for them, probably, so if he got busted he wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.” Mutterings of ‘ohhhhh’ could be heard throughout the room, and Hermione had a very thoughtful look on her face as she appraised him. Something like that probably wouldn’t have occurred to the Harry that she knew so well. That was the Harry from a year ago, this was the new model.

Harry and Bill did their business, and found nothing downstairs, other than anti-portkey and anti-Apparition wards, which were now becoming the norm on magical homes and businesses, at least on the inside.. Likewise the twins didn’t get anything besides those out of the upstairs either.

“Good, I’m glad that’s taken care of. Now tomorrow morning, before we go to the Ministry for our orientations, we’re all going to stop at St. Mungo’s. I want to make sure that the hag didn’t have any ulterior motives when she slapped me, and you all are going to each get a vial of blood taken from you.” Eh?

“Come again?”

“A vial of blood Ron. You need a drop of blood for the Pink, and a few other Defense mechanisms that I want to put in place around here. So rather than constantly prick peoples’ fingers, its better to do it another way. And there are a lot of places to Pink around here.”

Ron, Ginny, and Hermione hadn't known that about the Pink, only what happened to someone when they got hit with it. Luna had put it on her trunk as well, and combined with Neville's very explicit death threats, had given her a very smooth year as far as her things went, though she still wasn't what one could call 'friends' with any of her roommates.

"Like the front and back doors, and every window." And there were a decent amount of windows in the place, even if there were only two doors, they could tell that much from the outside.

"Right Bill. Winky!" She popped in from the shop.

"Yes Harry?"

"Please start making a blueprint of the house, note all entrances and exits, and see if you can find any hidden ways in and out. Make it a rush job, do nothing else, work-wise, between now and the time you get it done." Harry badly wanted to explore a little, but felt he should get security out of the way first.

"So the Marauder's Map III is about to be born?" Harry grinned at Reiko, his hands had stopped shaking now that he had something to concentrate his energies on.

"The perfect Defense mechanism."

"But the house is under Fidelius, they can't touch us here can they?"

"Are you willing to bet your life on that Luna?" Now that you mention it.....

"Well, I suppose every little bit helps."

"Yes ma'am. Now, the room situations. Neville, Luna, will you two be sharing a room?" Both of them went red immediately, and Sophie intervened for her ham handed boyfriend.

“No one is asking what you’ll be doing in there, and there won’t be any type of snooping. It’s just for logistical purposes, right Harry?” He did look a bit guilty.

“Precisely Sophie, anyone caught put up a Listening Charm or using an Extendable Ear, and I’ll find some garden gnomes to punish you with. You see, we have more couples than rooms, but we’ve found several solutions. Warrick and Reiko will stay in the basement, and the twins and Angelina and Alicia will stay in my trunk. Lee and Claudia will take a room, as will Sophie and I.” Lee and Claudia were nowhere near having sex yet, but both liked the idea of working up to it in complete privacy, so they had readily agreed to share a room. Warrick and Jonas both bruised their chins when they hit the floor after finding this out, but Claudia just smirked at them. Sophie took over again here:

“So that leaves three rooms available for two couples and the singles. Neville, Luna?” Luna took charge.

“We’ll share, but let us have Dobby be ready to do some quick rearranging if our father and grandmother want to see where we’re sleeping.” That was good thinking, thought Harry, and everyone now looked to Ron and Hermione.

“Ron, Hermione, there are two ways we can play this. We can have you two share a room, with Drew, Jonas, and Ginny in the last room.....or we can have guys in one room and girls in the other. I repeat, no one will harass you or any other couple. Right twins?” Hermione glared at them the hardest, but in reality they had been easy to convince on this score.

“Right.”

“You bet, we promise.”

“Word of honor.” Just the thought of listening to or watching Hermione and Ron going at it made them sick to their stomachs, both of them. Besides, though they joked about Ron and Hermione being

prudes, they weren't much more liberal when it came to things like that.

Hermione did not look too reassured, but Ron figured that Harry would keep the twins in line, especially after such public reassurances. He and Hermione had talked this over, and had come to an agreement on what to do if this came up. He looked at his sister first.

"Ginny, you're okay with sharing a room with those two?"

"I'm fine with it, it's not like there will be any hanky panky going on." Jonas would only be there for two weeks anyway, as Harry had written her. He had also told her of Drew's more or less relationship with Marie Ford, which eliminated that as a temptation, though he had left out his friend's theoretical attraction to Luna. Ginny was very happy in her relationship with Dean, and it was a measure of his trust in her, that he had told her that whatever configuration was fine by him.

"All right then, we'll take a room for ourselves." Sophie mentally started grouching, she had lost her bet to Harry. Dobby then reappeared, and addressed Harry.

"All of the luggage is upstairs in the hallway Harry." Winky could now be seen wandering around the downstairs area, sketchpad in hand, doing her rough draft drawing of the ground floor.

"Cool, let's take a look then." The lot of them followed the twins down the entrance way, where a little to the left was the staircase leading upstairs. They went up, noticing a nice and wide pair of banisters that would be a lot of fun to slide down. The hallway above had bathrooms on each side of the landing, with a bedroom on each end of the corridor. On the left side of the left bathroom, next to the master bedroom, was a small bedroom, with the last two rooms on the opposite. The master bedroom was the biggest, at nearly twice the size of the other four, which were all within a few square feet of being equal in dimension. The hallways were painted light blue, and the paint was peeling a little bit in places, but not too badly. Clearly

there had been some touchups in the last few years. Everyone found their luggage, neatly stacked in the hallways by Dobby, and the rooms were quickly chosen. Harry and Sophie took the master bedroom, as was their due, Harry being owner of the place and all. Neville and Luna snagged the one at the opposite end, though it was no bigger than the other three. Lee and Claudia moved their stuff into the room on the bathroom side, with Ron and Hermione directly across from them. The singles took the last one. There was only one bed in each room, but Drew quickly took care of that one, conjuring up two single beds for himself and Jonas, both young men insisting that Ginny get the big king size bed in the middle of the room. Warrick and Reiko peeked into the rooms a bit before heading downstairs to find a fully carpeted basement, with the most space of any of the couples, not counting those at Isla de Marauder. There was no bed, but Reiko swiftly took care of that. Conjured furniture did not last forever of course, but they were only going to be there a month.

Unpacking could wait until later, and soon the house was being explored by everyone, aside from Harry. He stopped in the room where it had all happened and just stared, mesmerized by what he couldn't see, but could very easily imagine. What little Sirius had told him about James and Lily had included Sirius' theory about what had happened and where. He could almost hear it, or maybe he could. Perhaps Voldemort had left a morsel of memory inside there during Fifth Year, Harry couldn't be sure. The others left him alone while he was doing this, sensing what he needed to do. After about 10 minutes, Drew walked in on him first. He put his hand on Harry's shoulder, and took in the haunted look on his friend's face.

"You okay dude? This must be a lot for you to take in." Harry gathered himself for a few seconds before responding.

"I am, and it is. I've been thinking about this ever since I came up with this scheme, half looking forward to the catharsis, half dreading that it wouldn't be a catharsis at all."

"Which did it turn out to be?"

“I’ll let you know when I figure that out. So what’s the rest of the house like?”

“Like your stereotypical British manor house, or at least the ones I’ve seen in the movies. We are going to need to go grocery shopping though, the cupboard is literally bare.”

“No 16 year old cans of tuna or the like?”

“Nope, your evil Headmaster must have had them cleaned out.”

“You got your first live look at him, what did you think?” Drew, like the others, had seen Dumbledore and the British cast of characters in Harry’s pensieve over the last months.

“He certainly didn’t seem willing to say boo to your man Rufus.” Harry smiled for the first time since entering the room, he looked around and saw that they were still alone in the room. Harry liked talking politics with Drew, since he was the only other member of the gang with any close proximity to the subject.

“I noticed that too. What do you think of Ron?”

“Hard to say so far, either you scared him with your Darth Vader impersonation or his girlfriend threatened him beforehand. Or he’s changed. Any of them could be the truth really.”

“That’s the \$21 question Drew. Do me a favor, keep an eye on him would you?”

“Sure, but to what end?” Harry wasn’t really sure, but felt that Drew would be better here than Jonas or Warrick.

“You’re a good observer of people, and he bears watching. I just don’t have a good feeling about his changed behavior lately.” Flattered that Harry thought highly of his observation skills, Drew readily agreed.

“No problem. He’s afraid of you though, I can tell that much.” Harry started chuckling.

“He’s not afraid of me specifically, he just knows that if it comes to down to it, it’ll be him and Hermione against me and the twins.....and there’s no way the pair of them win that fight.” Harry dearly hoped that Hermione’s intelligence was broad enough to cover that last fact.

“That would be interesting to see. C’mon dude, let’s go look at the house.”

“All right, hopefully Warrick has set up the television by now.” The television was a recent purchase by Harry for this situation, the largest big screen model that they had in the catalog. It was magically enhanced to work in an environment such as this, much as Harry’s stereo was. There was a nice mark-up for the enhancements, and Harry and the twins had idly talked a couple of times about trying to get in on what must be a lucrative niche in the magical entertainment market.

Warrick hadn’t set it up, but was debating with Jonas where to put it. They were in the family room, basically another huge living room on the ground floor. Also on the ground floor was a large kitchen, servants’ quarters that were ideal for Dobby and Winky, and another bathroom.....it seemed that Travis had undercounted how many bathrooms there were. Harry poked around and found everything in good order, though it would require some cleaning up. Dobby would be putting in a few more hours this week, but he had told Harry earlier that he was a bit nostalgic for his old routine, so it wouldn’t be a problem. Harry and Drew walked into the family room, where the television was sitting in the middle, waiting for placement.

“Finally, you need to be the tiebreaker for this. I say it should be on the west wall here. Jonas favors the north. What do you think?”

“Flip a coin or something, we can always move it if it doesn’t work.” Drew had an idea.

“Put it where the sun won’t hit it, you know for glare and the like.” That was a good idea, and it was placed accordingly. Warrick went behind it and fiddled with the cables for the set and the VCR, hooking up the batteries. As there was no electricity in magical Britain, even modified electronics had to be battery powered. Over the course of a few Flackter trips, the gang had accumulated quite the tape collection, and Warrick and Jonas spent some time with the DOM’s describing some of the titles. Hermione, the only one of them who had ever seen more than one movie before, was not a regular moviegoer, so she was of little help there. Reiko took Harry down the basement to show him their little area, and he was duly impressed. He had a thought about something, and calculated what they were underneath.

“I wonder how thick the walls and floors are in here. Do something for me Reiko, count to 30 and scream at the top of your lungs. I’ll go right above us and listen in.” She was curious too.

“All right, full volume. Go.....now.” She started counting softly out loud, as Harry quickly went up to the kitchen. Sophie and Luna, who had been happily getting to know each other, followed him in there.

“What’s going on?” Harry didn’t answer, as soon they heard a very faint scream. Sophie reacted with a start.

“Who was that!?”

“Reiko, we’re testing out the thickness of the floors.”

“What on earth would possess you to want to do that?” Harry shrugged.

“Who knows how my mind works Sophie, if you ever figure it out please let me know.” Reiko rescued him by coming into the kitchen just then.

“How much did you hear, I screamed as loud as I could.” Sophie just threw her hands up at that, as Luna started giggling.

“Don’t let him infect you too!” Reiko just patted her on the arm in sympathy.

“I’m with Warrick, and you’re saying that? This is staid for him.” Harry got back to the matter at hand.

“I would have barely heard it if I hadn’t been listening for you.”

“They built these old houses thick. Shall we go upstairs and try it out?”

“Sure, let’s go.” A morbidly curious Sophie and Luna followed the two upstairs, where they found out that the bedroom walls were indeed rather thick. Interesting. The quartet returned downstairs to find that Warrick had popped in the movie Goldeneye, and Ron and Neville were enraptured. Harry walked over to the twins, and quietly asked them:

“When are we meeting up with Alicia and Angelina?”

“They’re going to meet us at the shop at 5:30, they’ll come back with us then. Are we going out to eat or just bringing something back here?” It was now a little after 4:00 pm.

“I think we should bring something back, there’s 15 of us not counting Bill, that’s a lot for one restaurant. Better that the growing pains be gotten rid of here, rather than in public.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Pizza then?” Harry was always up for that, plus it was easy to get in bulk.

“We’ll get it after we do some food shopping.” The three of them went into the kitchen and re-did the cooling spells on the refrigerator and freezer, which were old enough to be separate. They weren’t that large, considering the number of people in the house, so Harry made a decision to buy a couple more. They went back inside and got through most of Goldeneye before they had to leave. Ron was outraged until they demonstrated that the movie could be turned back

on in the exact place it had been stopped. He could be heard muttering about muggles and the things they could do, like father like son. Bill went with them, as Fleur was in France for the week.

They met up with the women, and proceeded to clean out, figuratively, a grocers. Harry barely had enough muggle money on him to pay for it all, and had to send Dobby to Gringotts so that he would have enough for the pizza and the extra appliances. He didn't mind though, as they were all starting from scratch. Paper plates, napkins, toilet paper and the like took up a pair of carts alone. The cashier looked at the 16 people with a like number of shopping carts and nearly had a coronary. Harry just looked at her and said:

"Hey, we're hungry." While this was going on at the checkout, the twins and Jonas went off to get the pizzas ordered, while Angelina and Alicia took care of getting a couple of refrigerators. They all repaired back to the Hollow for the resumption of Goldeneye, and then the promised Star Wars, though only the first of the trilogy was shown that night. Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Luna couldn't take their eyes off the screen, nor could Bill, who could count on one hand the number of movies he'd seen. Afterwards, as the others were unpacking, Harry walked into Ron and Hermione's room, with Bill in tow.

"Are you two settling in fine?" Hermione had run the unpacking of course, and with Ron following orders, they were all but done.

"We are, this is a nice place. A lot bigger than my parents' place."

"And more stable than The Burrow."

"Our house has charm though Ron, that's why I've never been able to talk Mum and Dad into moving out of there." Fortrap, Bill's Gringotts mentor, had privately told Bill that his parents could have a mortgage at very advantageous terms whenever they chose, but they had declined. They had declined in 1988.

"True enough I guess." Harry looked at Bill, and girded himself for the battle to come.

“Guys, I thought we might have a talk.” Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“You mean ‘the’ talk?”

“That’s what I mean, its time we hashed things out, since the one in August didn’t seem to accomplish much. We need to come to some kind of understanding, or this whole commune thing is not going to work.” The obvious question came from Hermione.

“If it’s just the three of us, why is Bill here?”

“As a witness, and if necessary, a referee.” Ron made a slight face as Hermione kept going.

“Why would we need that?”

“Just in case Hermione, just in case. I don’t want two different versions of what goes in here getting out.” Now Ron was getting a wee bit defensive.

“Why would we fight? How did you get so paranoid?” Bill had a sinking feeling in his stomach as Harry answered that, and the older man then noticed that he hadn’t shut the door as he and Harry had come in.

“Have you ever been under Cruciatus Ron?”

“You know the answer to that.” Yes he did.

“Have you ever been shot?”

“Of course not, I’ve never even seen a gun in person.”

“Has your best mate ever betrayed your parents, leading to their deaths?” Even Ron saw where this was going now.

“No.”

“Has Dumbledore ever offered you in sacrifice to a Prophecy generated by a mentally unbalanced Divination teacher?”

“No.”

“Have all of those things happened to me Ron?” Ron’s response was a bare whisper now.

“Yes.” Harry walked casually up to his former best mate.

“THEN WHO THE HELL ARE YOU TO COMPLAIN THAT I’M PARANOID!?”

That little rejoinder could be heard throughout the entire house, and Ron fell back on the bed and almost went for his wand. Hermione stood in front of him though, and this time her hands were the ones shaking.

“Enough Harry.” Harry was only mad for a second, but felt a point should be raised anyway, as he said quietly:

“I don’t fall under your orders any longer Hermione, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh I noticed Harry, I’m the one you thought was informing on you to Dumbledore.”

“Yes, and I’m not proud that I was thinking that, and I was never sure either way. But it doesn’t mean I was wrong to.” Hermione had never looked more heartbroken, as this was the first time Harry had said it out loud to her.

“I honestly don’t know how you can say that.”

“There’s a price to be paid for self-awareness Hermione, clearly yours is still on back-order. You worshipped Dumbledore, and he

seemed to know just what I was up to at every moment. I know now that I was wrong, it was combination of ghosts, Listening Charms, and paintings. But I was trapped in that house Hermione, with nothing to do but think, and I decided to take the path of least resistance.”

“I would never betray you to Dumbledore.”

“I know that Hermione, and you know how convinced I am of that?”

“How?”

“You’re standing in this bedroom aren’t you?” It was all Bill could do to keep from smiling, and Hermione lips slightly cracked as well before she responded.

“That had occurred to me, yes.”

“Well there you go. I wouldn’t let you two anywhere near here if I thought you would go blabbing to Dumbledore.....not that I mind now, I’m sure he already knows what we’re going to be doing for the month.” Ron had recovered sufficiently to voice something, now that he was sure that Harry wasn’t going to Vader him.

“Are you really going to sit down with Dumbledore?”

“Yes I am, but at a time and place of my choosing, I have to keep him off balance if I can. I’m sure he knows about the tutoring, but even he doesn’t have the audacity to try and prevent it.” He would make sure of that with Travis the next day.

“Did you ever stop trusting me Harry?” This was Ron, and Harry’s heart was the one breaking now, and his voice choked a little as he got his next words out.

“Ron, Hermione.....I never once believed that you would ever turn me over to Voldemort, Malfoy, The Betrayer, or anyone on their side, you have my word.”

“But you thought we might to Dumbledore.” Harry stopped for a moment.

“Ron, Hermione, would you do me a favor and sit on the bed please.” Huh?

“Why?”

“Because we’re going to have some company. You can all come in now.” He barely raised his voice, but the door now opened fully, and the twins led the others inside to the now very full room. Fred didn’t look that guilty.

“Can you blame us? They could have heard that shout in Belfast for crying out loud, and that’s a not a small sea between here and there.” Godric’s Hollow was about 35 kilometers from the Irish Sea, and Belfast was a long way off.

“I did raise my voice, yes. Now as to your question Ron, about whether or not I thought you would betray me to Dumbledore. Here’s the problem: There are three sides to this war: Voldemort’s side, my side, and Dumbledore’s side. Rufus Scrimgeour and Travis Biller are on my side, rather than me on theirs’, for their own reasons of course. Voldemort wants me dead because of some half assed Prophecy. I want Voldemort dead because he killed my parents, Cedric, and his henchwoman killed Sirius.....oh, and he tried to off my 16 month old self. Not cricket really if you ask me. Dumbledore wants Voldemort dead because it would be one less thing for him to worry about, and he would prefer that Voldemort takes me with him.” Dead silence in the room, as even Bill was astonished. Hermione managed to ask:

“What do you mean by that Harry?”

“It’s become increasingly obvious to me over the last months, and thinking on the last years in retrospect, that Dumbledore sees me as the next Dark Lord.” Cabin pressure was lost again by everyone but the twins and Sophie, as they had seen Harry’s reasoning evolve

over the months. Neville would have started pacing if there was any room to maneuver.

“Oh my God, that explains so much. He never checked on you with the muggles, he never dreamed you would grow up in such a harsh environment.....he never thought it would harden you that much.” Ginny just sat down on the floor, and took up where Neville left off.

“That’s how Tom Riddle grew up, hard and unforgiving. And powerful, just as powerful as you are Harry.”

“Right Ginny, he sees me as a repeat of the mistakes he made with Riddle, and the fact that I have refused to forgive him this past year has only cemented that thinking. He knew this would happen somehow, that’s why I’ve had such shoddy teaching until this past year. That’s why he doesn’t want me to win guys, he just wants me not to lose. Now that might be my paranoid self talking, but no other explanation fits the facts as logically. Remember what I told you Hermione, after the trial, after I took Voldemort’s wand?” Hermione indeed thought of those words every time she was in close proximity to Dumbledore or McGonagall.

“If you were still a student at Hogwarts, we would both be dead.”

“How hard would it have been for him to teach me how to wandlessly do that Summoning Spell? Ray managed in 90 minutes, and it’s come in very handy ever since.” It was true, and Harry could now do a decent wandless Reducto and Abrumpere as well.

“Do you think he’s setting you up to die? Or that he just won’t stand in the way?”

“The second Ron, though the first isn’t out of the question. The difference between Riddle and I, is that I can trust. I trust everyone in this room, plus Molly, Arthur, and Fleur. Remus and Tonks can’t screw me over, due to their oaths, but I still don’t trust them. Does Tommy trust that many? Another subtle difference is that I don’t want ANY of you dying for me, I would prefer you so much as not sprain an

ankle if you can help it. If every Death Eater died, but Riddle took me out? He would consider it a job well done.”

“Not a bad manifesto for the Order of Potter.” Harry looked visibly ill at hearing that.

“No more Orders, not for me George. We are a group of friends, not a barely legal group of vigilantes, like another group I might mention.”

“Hey now, I’m still technically a member of that group you know.”

“Yet we love you anyway Bill.”

“Why thank you Harry. You know that Mum begged me to move in here with you, as a chaperone.” That was news to Harry, as Molly and Arthur hadn’t mentioned that during their ‘roof talk’ back at Great Lakes. Maybe said begging had come afterward.

“Why didn’t you? You know you’d have been welcome.”

“I liked the idea, but Fleur wanted no part of it, she figured you sneaky little suckers would be trying to listen in to things you shouldn’t be listening to.” Fred handled this one, forestalling Harry, who was winding up on that one.

“I hate to break this to the woman you love big brother, but I for one have better things to do than try to listen in to your sordid escapades.” A chorus followed of:

“Me too.”

“Well even if Fleur believed that, forget it. You guys will be fine without us around.”

Mockery of Bill soon commenced, and he took his jabs like the man that he was, there were a lot of jabs at just who would be wearing the wedding dress come late July. He had assured his mother that if anyone could keep a lid on things here, Harry could, with Sophie to

keep him in line.....all four adult Weasleys, not counting twins, had been much impressed by Sophie during their limited time observing her.

The groups broke up not long after the Bill taunting, and things with the former trio were now somewhat resolved, at least in the broader sense. Ron felt reassured that Harry wasn't going to kill him.....Hermione had a better understanding of Harry's thought processes.....and Harry was just relieved that there was no carnage. He hadn't meant to bring the others into it with his scream at Ron, but that didn't mean it wasn't a good thing. Everyone went to bed, and if Ron/Hermione and Neville/Luna were doing the wild thing, no one but the couples themselves knew about it.

Thank goodness.

Tuesday, July 1, 1997

Special Projects Area, Conference Room

Ministry of Magic

1:00 pm

The morning visit to St. Mungo's had proven to be rather uneventful as it turned out. Umbridge had not passed anything to Harry with the slap, she just had a 'moment' is all. The Medi-Witch handling Harry's case had balked at the blood vials though, at least she balked until Harry volunteered to floo his new best friend Rufus Scrimgeour. That sure got her hopping, to Harry's vast amusement. Besides, it wasn't as if the blood was being given involuntarily.....well except for Ron though, he was still dubious about the value of the Pink, until George offered him a deal.

"Tell you what little brother, if you volunteer to demonstrate the results of the Pink for us tonight, we'll convert two of your volunteer hours at the shop into paid hours." Ron didn't hesitate, money talked as far as he was concerned.

“Deal.” It couldn’t be that bad, could it? Ron then willingly gave up the vial of blood, after exacting a promise from Harry that he would destroy any leftovers, a promise Harry extended to all of the other Brits. The Pink would have to be renewed at Great Lakes though, so the Americans were fine with him keeping any leftovers.

The enhanced gang, hereafter known as the E-gang, were all seated when Travis came in the door, followed by three men and four women. Tonks was the only one familiar to most of them, though the DOM’s had met Sarah Westbrook and Rob Graham at the Dursleys’.

“All right then, it’s good to see you all. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting Luna or Neville, but I know everyone else. I would like to introduce your instructors, who’ll be working with you over the next month:

“Nymphadora Tonks I understand most of you know. She’ll be tutoring you in surveillance techniques and counter-surveillance methods.”

“Rob Graham will be giving you pointers in hand to hand fighting basics, just in case the enemy may have your wand. Some of you can fight wandlessly, Harry, but these all be tricks worth learning.”

“Sarah Westbrook will be your shield expert. I understand that there are a couple of you that are very gifted in that area, but I think she’ll have some cool things to show you.”

“Mike Peplowski will drill you on rapid fire and using multiple angle spells and curses.” Peplowski was larger than Graham, no mean feat, and he had a friendly smile.

“Connie Phinney will be getting you ready for your Apparition tests, so Fred and George will be sitting that part out. Luna and Ginny, you will receive special licenses allowing you to take the tests at the end of the month, along with Harry and Neville, the youngest of their age group. The rest of you can take the test as soon as you feel you’re ready. The only conditions Ginny and Luna, are that we would prefer you not brag about this to your friends at school, outside of your

boyfriend of course Ginny. No need for anyone to know that you're special cases here, and ask for the same thing themselves. Too much paperwork." Apparition instruction was generally a summer thing, and the Americans and Harry had planned on taking the test in August, until now anyway.

"Robert Marr is on loan to us from the Unspeakables, and he will give you access to some experimental things we've been working on." Bones had nearly gone ballistic when she was told that Marr of all people was to be detailed to this assignment. But Marr himself had asked her to reconsider, saying that it would be good for him to be around young people for a change, particular ones as curious as this lot. He had not backslid at all since his release from St. Mungo's in early March, and had mostly reconstructed his biological Tracking Charm.

"Lucy Deakins will be your final instructor, and she will be joining me in giving you detailed personal histories of our Death Eater friends, and what tactics and curses they like to employ. So if you spot, let's say, Rodolphus Lestrange, taking aim at you, you'll have a good idea of how to respond tactically. Now these lessons will mostly be for our Britain based students, and Harry, but you American folk will get a couple of hours of background as well.....to save Harry from having to repeat it all if nothing else. Besides which, I know that this isn't your first visit to our lovely shores since you met Harry, and I hope it isn't the last." It was Drew's first visit, but Travis was just speaking generally anyway.

Travis then had the students introduce themselves, and talk a little about what they hoped to get out of the sessions. After a little of this, Travis had everyone break up into groups to start in on the basics, as this would be the only day that all of the young ones would be doing their tutoring en masse. Drew and Reiko went with Tonks, Hermione and Luna with Lucy Deakins, Warrick got a one on one with Robert Marr after revealing that his father was a wand maker, Ron and Jonas were detailed to Rob Graham, while Lee, Fred and George needed the shield work that Sarah Westbrook could give them, and Sophie and Claudia got started on their Apparition training. Mike Peplowski was needed for other things, and was just there for the

orientation, he had to get back to Little Hangleton for his role in the listening posts there. That left just Harry, whom Biller took with him to meet Rufus and Bones, after the Head Auror gave out parchments denoting the training schedule for the next 12 days.....everyone would have Sundays off, and Biller made a point of keeping romantic couples on the same schedule as well, a nice touch that they all appreciated. It was an intricate document, and had taken no small amount of time to prepare, a function of the value Rufus and his Head Auror placed on Harry's cooperation.

"What do you think so far Harry?"

"I think this whole thing is going to work out really well. Thanks for all that you've done to set it up."

"My pleasure, it was fun actually. Most of my day is spent doing paperwork and such, but this was a nice twisted way of doing it. Thanks for the scouting reports on your friends too, that helped a lot."

"Well I'm not up on the Brits as much as I used to be, but Neville's been keeping me up to date via Dobby."

"Where the hell did you find Dobby anyway? I've never seen someone use a house elf the way you have."

Harry told him the Dobby story for the rest of their trip to Rufus' office, and Biller was already plotting ways to replicate the Harry/Dobby success story with his own house elf. After they knocked and were bidden to enter, they walked in to find that Bones and Rufus were wrapping up a meeting with Amos Diggory. Seeing Diggory always gave Harry a brief start, even though the man looked very little like his dead son. After saying hello and shaking Harry's hand, the older man beat a retreat, not being needed for this. Rufus looked at Harry with a friendly smile.

"Well Harry, I understand that the jailbird really was just smacking you for the hell of it." Always make them feel at ease was one of The Minister's mottos, and it put a sly grin on Harry's face.

“I wonder if we'll regret you stopping my response?”

“I doubt it, but feel free to say ‘I told you so’ if it ever happens. I suppose you're wondering why I stopped you from slaughtering her?” Harry wasn't really, or at least he thought he knew why the other man had prevented him from striking her down in furious anger.

“Not really, I realize that the forms must be maintained and obeyed. Plus I'm sure there are fence sitters that we would rather not antagonize.” It was all Rufus and Travis could do not to look at Bones right about now, but they managed.

“That was pretty much my reasoning as it happens, I'm pleased that you're not bitter about a missed opportunity. So how's the house?”

“A bit uncomfortable right now, with so many people and a house with the kind of history that the Hollow has, but we'll adjust.”

“That was the perfect political answer, you should be proud.”

“I'm learning Minister, I'm learning. I've been around you and President Chabon enough to get some of the lingo down.”

“And your friend Drew's mother will be the next President, interesting.”

“She's still chewing on it, but we're all hoping she runs. I'll do what I can to help her if she does.” He had sent that offer to Hollie Baylor in a Dobby-gram, and she had returned a note thanking him and that she would take him up on it if she wound up running.

“I hope she'll do it to, we need to remain allies with America, with or without Voldemort bothering us, and our read of the landscape over there says that she would be best for us in that job. Now tell me.....us, sorry Amelia.....are you really going to meet with Dumbledore?” This was a bit pattern forming, more than one person had asked him that the day before.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? What’s the big deal?”

“Because the man is just going to keep asking and chasing until you do. And perhaps it would be best to hear him out once and for all.”

“Why’s that?”

“So at least you’ll know why he made the decisions he did Harry, and while I’m firmly in your corner on this and all other Dumbledore matters, I think you should listen to what the man has to say. Take it with 1,000 grains of salt to be sure, but at the very least you will have some closure on the issues at hand, and get some insight into the man himself. One thing I noticed when I became Head Auror is that it’s a lot different dealing with Dumbledore as a supposed equal than it is dealing with him as a student.” Harry pondered that for a moment, it made a lot of sense when looked at from that point of view.

“All right then, I was waffling on whether to do it or not, but I’ll do as you suggest. I imagine that Bill and Fleur will invite him to the wedding, and at the reception I’ll make arrangements with him to talk.....totally on my terms of course, but by then he should be eager enough to agree to most anything.”

“Yes he should be, though you’ll get your next glimpse of him a lot earlier, at the League meeting on Saturday. What about Draco? Assuming his throat is sufficiently recovered of course.” Bones gave a dark look at Travis, as he had started to laugh.

“I can’t imagine what that ferret would have to tell me that’s so interesting. I won’t make an example of him again, but I have no interest in smoking a peace pipe with him. Where is he by the way, staying at Hogwarts?”

“No, he’s at Malfoy Manor with his mother. It’s under Fidelius, so he’s safe enough. The old man was willing to have him at Hogwarts, but Draco wanted some quality time with his mother.” Harry couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to be in close proximity to Narcissa Malfoy, but a son’s love was a son’s love.

“Has Mother Malfoy been any kind of a problem?”

“Actually no, and I can’t believe it either Harry. A lot of what you get from Travis and Lucy in your tutoring will be Narcissa’s intelligence, a strange word given the woman we’re talking about, but still. All given under Veritaserum of course, but she hasn’t been complaining. Word has leaked through the grapevine that Lucius has been demoted down to foot soldier, but there haven’t been any large scale attacks against us recently, so we’re not sure. He hasn’t been sighted, we know that much, as most of his intelligence and financial network was rolled up months ago.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because Voldemort is settling affairs with Fenrir Greyback. There have been a few skirmishes between the Death Eaters and werewolves over the last three months, and from all accounts our werewolf friends are taking a pasting.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Well ideally the two sides would decimate each other, and we could just have you and Voldemort do your thing and be done with it. We’re not that fortunate though, so I suppose I would rather have as few werewolves running around as possible. We won’t help the Death Eaters of course, but better they take the risk there and not us. We haven’t lost an Auror since the Malfoy trial, and I’d as soon keep it that way.” Bones and Biller had trumpeted this fact during their May recruitment process. Harry must have had the same thing on his mind:

“How did the recruitments go?”

“We filled our quota, and a little more, for safety’s sake. We got most of them from Canada and your Salem school over there, this wasn’t a good year for Defense at Hogwarts, or at Great Lakes for that matter. Next year will be the mother lode of course, at least at Hogwarts. You won’t have to bother with the Academy of course Harry, just let us know when you’re done playing Quidditch and we’ll

work something out.” Biller was nodding in agreement, and surprisingly so was Bones. She knew someone as impatient as Harry probably wouldn’t put up with two years pretending to learn stuff he already mostly knew. She already had plans to make him her personal aide-de-camp and bodyguard while he learned the ins and outs of the DMLE. He was a viable asset, and she planned to make sure he stayed in-country.

“We’ll see sir, we’ll see. I should probably tell you that they made me the same offer in Boston.”

“I have no doubt, you’re a valuable resource. Now do you have any questions for us?” He sure did.

“How is the Little Hangleton operation going?” Rufus and Travis had told him a little about it during the February meeting.

“Nothing so far, though we’re convinced that the Death Eaters are in that house somewhere, or have been sometime in the last year.”

“And you don’t want to raid it.....” Rufus had been asked that question more than once by people in the know about Riddle Manor, so his answer was well practiced.

“I don’t dare commit to another major battle without knowing what I’m facing. Like any muggle solicitor will tell you: Don’t ask any question in court that you don’t already know the answer to. That works for this situation too. We could storm the house, sure, but Voldemort probably has wards and booby traps that we would never see coming until it was too late. I’m half tempted to find the nearest muggle missile battery and Imperious the commander into doing some target practice on the place. At least then we would know.” The first time he had said that in private, Bones had almost walked out the door demanding impeachment, thinking he was serious. He wasn’t though.

“The Lycans used a lot of shoulder mounted missiles on the schools back in February, they did some damage, but not as much as you would think.”

“Well I would never go there, it would be hard to explain to the public even if we were right. No, we just have to hope that there’s a slip-up in Death Eater land. That’s not out of the realm obviously, and I don’t see the need to go on the offensive just yet.”

“Will me being here draw them out perhaps?” Looks passed over the faces of Bones and Biller, as Rufus leaned back in his chair.

“I don’t know, and that’s the sticky wicket Harry. We haven’t advertised your coming, as promised, but word has leaked out. The real question is what does Voldemort want? Does he want you safely in America, as far away from him as possible? Or does he want to force the final confrontation? If I was him I’d launch an attack on WWW right this second, something sure to bring you over there ready for battle. Then you two could get it over with and we could all go home.” Harry started laughing in spite of himself. Rufus’ style was more like Josh Lyman than he would expect from one of the most influential Wizards in the world.

“Why wouldn’t he do that?”

“Who the hell knows what goes through that man’s mind, if you can even call him a man anymore. It could be that he’s waiting for you to kill Dumbledore for him, as a prelude to you and his outfit joining forces. Could be that he thinks you’ll stay in America forever and allow him a free hand, as long as he doesn’t target a Weasley or one of your other friends.” That last one was more right than any of the four of them knew. Voldemort had long standing orders to his Death Eaters that certain magicals were not to be touched unless absolutely necessary, and most of those magicals were either living in Godric’s Hollow in July, or had the name Weasley, or both. Bones decided to sally forth into the conversation.

“Harry, you need to assure us right now that you won’t attack Dumbledore during your talk with him.” Harry turned to her, and managed a polite response.

“Why do I need to do that Madam Bones?” Bones had been afraid of that, and suspected that her two colleagues would do nothing more than egg Harry on. Dumbledore’s Machiavellian intrigues with the safety of his students concerned her too, but she didn’t out and out loathe the man like the other three here in the room did.

“Because we’re in enough trouble without a civil war on our side.”

“Really? Interesting. I’ll keep that in mind when he provokes me into attacking him, and we know he will.” He knew nothing of the kind really, but he wanted to see how far Bones would go here, particularly when she didn’t have Rufus’ support.

“Then be the adult in the situation and don’t let him provoke you too far.” Harry was hard pressed not to laugh in her face.

“I was the adult during most of the Snape business for five years and look where that got me. No Madam Bones, if he wants a fight I’ll give it to him.” Bones didn’t know what to say to that really, but she tried nonetheless.

“You can’t beat him Harry.” He stared hard at her.

“Arthur said the same thing, funny how everyone keeps underestimating me. I’m sure Voldemort did before I took his wand and killed half a dozen of his Death Eaters.....all without using Avada Kedavra.”

“True, I can’t refute any of that Harry.”

“No you can’t, but I’m not unreasonable Madam Bones, and given that there will be multiple witnesses in the room, I doubt the old coot will try anything stupid. I know I certainly won’t.” That mollified Bones to a great degree.

“I’m glad to hear that Harry. And know that I’m on your side in this, non-violently. I agree with very few of the decisions he’s made about,

and for, you over the years.” Harry reply was more for Rufus’ benefit than hers.

“Madam Bones, that’s exactly why I’ve always found the idea of a meeting with Dumbledore to be pointless at best, and an invitation to disaster at worst. There’s nothing he can say that will justify the crimes he’s committed against me over the years. And yes, when Voldemort is defeated, Albus and I will have a reckoning of some sort. My own sense of justice demands it.” Bones took that for what it was worth, and then dipped her toe in very dangerous waters, but something compelled her to ask:

“Harry, do you wish to pursue criminal charges against him? A pensieve highlight reel of your experiences with the Dursleys would be incredibly damaging to him, both legally and public relations-wise.” Unbeknownst to anyone else in the room, Bones had interviewed Petunia Dursley about a month after the Dementor incident in 1995, and had been hard pressed not to kill the woman right then and there.

“Is there a statute of limitations I should be aware of?” The temperature in the room dropped a degree as Harry didn’t turn them down right away.

“Well sooner is better than later, but it can probably wait another year, if you want to finish school first.”

“Let’s see where the war takes us. I might want to revisit it later on, and thank you for suggesting it.” Bones breathed a mental sigh of relief that she was almost sure the men in the room could sense. She had heard countless stories in the past of how volatile Harry could be when even slightly pushed, stories that did not jibe with her face to face meetings with him.

“You’re welcome.”

The rest of the talk was about what Harry himself was looking to get out of the tutoring. He told them it was a combination of close quarter combat tactics and some practice partners that he could go all out against and not risk friendships. Spell and Curse knowledge,

surprisingly to the older ones, was not on the menu, and Harry figured his private, Black Library-based, research would more than see to his needs. The Apparition training would be nice too, though he would certainly take a sampling of all seven disciplines being taught, of course he had 40 hours a week to fill too. He got to know Rufus and Bones a bit more on a personal level as well, as their subtle recruitment of him was going full bore. It's not often that the two highest ranking officials in a government give over two hours of their afternoon to a 16 year old kid, and this gesture did not go unnoticed by the kid in question.

Dinner that night was filled with excited talk about the afternoon's events, and they made plans to start some dueling practice come the weekend, when Neville's grandmother, Luna's father, and Molly and Arthur were scheduled for one mass visit. The kitchen couldn't handle that many people eating at one time, so everyone piled into the TV room, where Reiko conjured up a long table for them. Harry and the twins weren't at the table though, as they spent the time carrying sandwiches around as they Pinked every door and window in the house. It took well over an hour, but they could now breathe a lot easier, Harry had trouble believing that Fidelius was that foolproof. No recon of the outside had happened, that would come the next day by those not going to the Ministry.

After Harry and the twins were done with their legitimate work, they did a quick Pink job on the library entrance way, and called them all over.

"Ron, you wondered what the Pink effect would look like. Now the only ones who have seen it are Warrick and myself, at least the only ones here. We didn't get pictures of young Joe and his transcoloration, Reiko, but we're going to get a live look now. Ron, you ready to get two of your volunteer hours back?"

"You bet. One thing though, no pictures." Harry hadn't wanted that anyway, he wanted to remove temptation from Fred and George, so Winky was upstairs dusting right now.

“Fair enough, though teasing is optional. Just remember the money you’ll be saving by doing this.”

Harry then cast Cushioning Charms all along the hallway and into the main living room, just for safety’s sake.

“Okay mate, whenever you’re ready. Just walk into the library. Oh, and don’t have your wand out, I don’t know what the Pink will do to it.” Everyone looked expectantly at Ron, who all of the sudden didn’t think this was a good idea. He handed his wand to Hermione and took a deep breath.

“All right, here goes.”

He walked semi-normally toward the door, and slowed down right as he got there, reminding the Americans of a similar scene in Stargate. After a few seconds hesitation, he walked through.

Well not really, he got halfway through before the Pink punted him somewhat harshly into the living room across the hall. Everyone rushed over to get a look at him, and wouldn’t you know it, he was pink from top to bottom. Even the whites of his eyes were no longer white. Hermione rushed over to him, muttering under her breath about daredevil idiots..

“Are you all right Ron?” The young man himself was a little dazed, but mostly coherent.

“I see pink.”

That brought the house down, figuratively. He got to his feet somehow and shook his head vigorously, clearing some cobwebs.

“That was a trip, but would you please get this stuff off me.” Hermione rounded on Harry.

“He could have been seriously hurt you prat!” Harry just walked up to Ron and waved his wand at him, muttering the counter-curse. The

pink faded away in about 10 seconds, and Ron was back to normal. He said to Hermione somewhat gently.

“Hermione, please think before you say things like that. Do you honestly think I would have allowed Joe Clancy, not a nice person at the time, much less Ron, experience the Pink without first having tested it on myself?” That shut her up in a hurry, with a suitably guilty look on her face, as Warrick started snickering. Not at her really though.

“You should have seen it too, he didn’t think of the Cushioning Charms then either.” Harry shook his head ruefully.

“I used them for Clancy though, its probably what got Warrick and I out of a detention or two, that Joe wasn’t hurt.”

“You still didn’t get any pictures though.”

“Reiko is never going to let go of that, so get used to hearing it. I somehow managed to get through an entire year without a detention, and that was mainly because I didn’t get greedy when I didn’t have to.” Warrick shook his finger at his roommate.

“That and Murray letting you do whatever you wanted.”

“That surely helped. I’ll show you guys some Murray moments via pensieve. Then you can compare her with our beloved Albus.” It was movie night again though, as Ron and Neville loudly requested The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi, as they were now official Star Wars junkies..

Right before bed, Winky produced her detailed blueprint of the house. She had been over every inch of it, and there seemed to be no hidden passageways or secret entrances into the place. With so many people in the house, it only took 10 minutes to get Marauders’ Map III up and running, and Harry promised again that it would be used for defensive purposes only, no pranking. Indeed Sophie had prevailed upon him to impose a no-pranking edict for the month, feeling that it might devolve into Americans, Harry, and the twins v.

the five other Brits, and there was only one way that would turn out.....and it wasn't out of the question that Neville and Luna might switch sides, Ginny too. That was some woman that Harry had snared.

Wednesday, July 2, 1997

Ministry of Magic

Harry spent the morning working with Connie Phinney on his Apparition skills. They dealt mostly with theory at first, as she went through a lot of do's and don'ts, as well as some of the history behind it. Biller had alerted the instructors as to Harry's now year-long love of history, and they all planned to incorporate that into his lessons. He found the 43 year old Phinney to be very pleasant to work with, and it turned out that her son Julius was about to start his second year in Gryffindor. The kid was a big Harry fan, even though he had lost out on the opportunity to go to school with him, and was agog to find out that his mother would be tutoring him. Harry reluctantly agreed to autograph a WWW item if she brought it in.....he really disliked the idea of giving out autographs, but she was helping him a lot.

While Harry was with Phinney, Warrick and Jonas worked with Rob Graham in hand to hand techniques, and Sophie and Reiko were tutored by a sleep deprived Mike Peplowski, just off the night train from the Little Hangleton listening post, who nonetheless gave them a nice walk through on some rapid fire drills. Claudia and Drew went out into Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley with Tonks to get a lay of the land. They studiously avoided mentioning to Tonks Harry's distrust of her, and if the metamorph was curious, she didn't show it.

In the afternoon, Harry would spend two hours working solely with Biller on dueling. They would not tell anyone the results of their workouts, not even Sophie or Travis' wife Rebecca, but both of them had large smiles on their exhausted faces when they appeared out of the locked training room.

Not those kinds of smiles thank you very much.

The Brits had the day off, as Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna were getting an orientation of their own at WWW, in the manufacturing area, with Lee taking over from Molly in front, though mother of Fred and George had enjoyed the change of pace during her two days in the shop. Hermione was the lone holdout, refusing to work for the twins in any capacity, and she spent the day in the Hollow's library, which stunned everybody, for about 1/1000 of a second. Harry got back first, and he joined her there, plopping down on a settee in the middle of the room.

"How's the studying going?"

"It's a nice collection, lot's of very rare looking books and parchments.....ummm, Harry, not to be rude, but you need a shower. Have you been working out with your beloved Crystal Palace by any chance?"

"I wish, what I wouldn't give for the internet over there, a lot easier to check scores that way. No, I was dueling with Travis." Harry's political shack up with Rufus and Biller was very disquieting for Hermione, and she was wondering if perhaps this was the time to talk about it.

"All afternoon?"

"For a couple of hours, then I spent some time with Lucy, just chatting and getting some background stuff."

"And who is the better duelist? You, or our Head Auror?"

"I won't say, except that he's pretty good."

"Better than any of your American friends?"

"Hard to say, I don't see them fight that much. Drew is the best of them really, then probably Sophie. What about you guys? Could any of them take you out?"

“I don’t think so, but its hard to say, though Neville is gaining rapidly. Remus didn’t have us doing much dueling this past year, he says it will change come fall, but you never know. I’ve heard that Dumbledore sets the curriculum in Defense now, and I understand that he’s not big on dueling.” Well there’s a big surprise, Harry thought sarcastically.

“Have you and Ron dueled?”

“Yes, in Rogue DA, and no, he can’t beat me. We don’t do a lot of dueling there either, a few too many rivalries if you ask me, all of them ready to flare up. Introducing Draco didn’t help matters, though he’s been on his best behavior with us. Can Sophie last more than 10 seconds with you?”

“Not if I’m trying. The quick draw makes any fair fight kind of useless right now.” Sophie usually coerced him into trying though, saying that she wanted his best effort. Add to that the sure knowledge that Harry would never hear the end of it if any of his friends beat him, rigged or not.

“It’s hard, dueling someone you love, isn’t it?”

“The twins can last 30 seconds if they take me two-on-one.” That Hermione face again.

“Ah the twins, your new best mates.” And the penny drops.

“A little jealousy there Hermione? Or is it reflected from Ron?”

“Both, if you want the truth.....I’m assuming that you want the truth, right?”

“Of course, there’s no point is having a conversation without it. Speaking of truth, if you will.....Why didn’t you tell me that you and Ron had become a couple? Three weeks Hermione, that’s how long before I confronted you about it in Little Whinging, and it fell to Bill and the twins to tell me about it anyway. That’s a long time to be

holding out on someone who was supposed to be your best mate.” Hermione and Ron had long agreed that they had no good defense for this line of attack, but she tried anyway.

“We wanted to tell you in person Harry, we weren’t sure how you would react.”

“I would have been fine with it Hermione, and I still am. I only take shots about it so that Ron isn’t the only one getting digs in, I don’t want him to be lonely.” WHAM! There was a shot right there, and she colored a bit.

“He doesn’t do that anymore, almost. Are you saying that you don’t take shots about him behind his back to your American friends?”

“I wish you would stop referring to them as my ‘American friends’, as if they are a different category than the five of you. And yes I do, the difference being that I do it in response to Ron, and to, and in front of, people who won’t write to you blabbing about it.”

“Oh there’s a big difference. And you never answered my question about the twins.” Well if she could be lawyerly, so could he.

“You didn’t ask a question Hermione, you merely said that they’re my best mates.”

“Aren’t they?”

“Yes they are, you’ll see that when I play you guys a pensieve memory of the Lycan battle. They have my back at every turn, I’d be dead right now if not for them.” She flared for a second.

“So did we Harry, our lives have been risked more than once too, and at a lot younger ages than Fred and George.” Uh, not really there Hermione, there were a couple of key exceptions.

“Except for two summers ago, and before the first task at the Tri-Wizard, though that was just Ron.” No, Harry had never gotten past that.

“You’re never going to let us live that down, are you?” His quick rejoinder:

“Is he ever going to let me live down my money and fame?” She surprised him by smiling slightly.

“Touché.”

“Hermione, I would give anything for you not to be put in the middle of this, I really would. But ultimately it can’t be helped, it was inevitable from the day we three became friends. There was always going to be a day of reckoning with Ron, I’m only surprised it took this long. I’m rich, and Merlin willing, I always will be. I’m famous, and Merlin willing, someday I won’t be. I’ll always love you like a sister, and Ron like a brother, even if I won’t admit that out loud to anyone but myself. But this situation is what it is, I don’t know what else I can do. I won’t surrender to your collective whims, especially as they both seem to have me back at Hogwarts.”

“I don’t know what to do either Harry, maybe this month is what we need to get things back on track.” Harry then asked something that he didn’t really want to know, but Sophie still wanted him to find out.

“Hermione, did you ever have romantic feelings for me?” Hermione almost fell out of her chair.

“I’m sorry?”

“One of us was going to ask it eventually, might as well be me.” She took some time to consider her response.

“I don’t know Harry, I guess I always assumed that you would never make any advances toward me, so I never let any feelings toward you develop.” This was interesting, so Harry went along.

“Why wouldn’t I have made any advances?”

“Because Ron has had a crush on me since we were 12 years old, and I’ve known about it almost from the day it started. I just figured you wouldn’t want to be the one to take that chance away from him, no matter what you may have felt.” HmMMM.

“Yet you two waited how many years to start something?”

“I wasn’t ready, and neither was he. You were too focused on staying alive and dealing with Snape and Malfoy to have a girlfriend. What did we beat you by? Three weeks give or take. It didn’t take you long once you got to America.” Harry ignored that.

“I knew about his crush, though he never told me flat out.” Hermione found that very hard to believe, even though Ron had told her the same thing.

“How did you know then?”

“Hermione, I spent 23.5 hours a day with Ron for five school years, there’s literally nothing about him that I don’t know, and vice versa.” One can assume that bathroom related activities took up the remaining half an hour.

“He didn’t know you were planning to leave. Didn’t you say that you’d been thinking about it for over a year?” He got up and walked over to her chair, and knelt down.

“He knew Hermione, don’t kid yourself. Maybe he didn’t want to believe it, and I certainly didn’t try to give anything away, but he had to suspect something.”

“I didn’t.” Harry had assumed this very thing, and wanted badly to point out that Hermione, for all her considerable gifts, wasn’t the most perceptive person in the world.

“I don’t know what to say to that Hermione. I guess I didn’t want you to try and talk me out of it.”

“Did anyone try?” Harry thought on that for a moment.

“Now that you mention it, no. Bill and Peter Tyson made very sure I was serious and knew the possible ramifications, but no one tried to talk me out of it.” To this day Harry didn’t know if Ron and Hermione knew of Neville’s and Luna’s full involvement in Snape Night, so he didn’t dare mention them here.

“Perhaps a devil’s advocate would have been useful. You stacked your advisors to reach your desired solution.” Harry shrugged, he probably had.

“Maybe, but the desired solution worked very well. My life was only risked once all year, and the Lycans weren’t after me specifically.” That Tony Almeida had known exactly who he was didn’t need to be mentioned.

“Maybe it would have been different at Hogwarts if you had stayed.” He started laughing cynically.

“No it wouldn’t have Hermione. Draco only laid off you people so that I wouldn’t come back and murder him, probably on Voldemort’s explicit orders, and Snape would still have been there too, messing with Gryffindors to his heart’s content. And our beloved Headmaster still wouldn’t have done a thing to stop any of it.” Hermione stared at him, blank faced, for a moment.

“You’re right, it wouldn’t have been different.”

“So maybe it was for the best. You had a peaceful year there, not counting the Malfoy trial.”

“Where you saved my life.”

“I had you going when I laid down my wand though, didn’t I?” She started chuckling, and put her hand on his arm for a moment.

“I almost made a mess when you did that.”

“I had to sell it to Voldemort, and his henchmen.”

“You did it very well indeed, Oscar worthy it was.” They heard the front door opening, and American voices chattering. Harry stood up.

“I never asked, how well did you figure out Occlumency?”

“Your notes were very instructive, as were the books your solicitor bought you, though you really need to clean your handwriting still. I’ve had Remus try to invade my mind a few times, and I can push him out after a bit of time. I don’t know if he was trying his hardest or not though.”

“I’m sure he was, unless Dumbledore advised him not to. I don’t think it’s in the old man’s best interests to have you up to par in keeping him out of your mind. We can work on that kind of thing sometime this month if you want.” Sophie and the others came in now, as Hermione pondered that for a moment. Another question raised itself first.

“I’d like that, thank you. By the way, what did Remus mean by ‘the talk’?” Only Hermione in the room didn’t know what that meant, not that it really mattered, so he told her.

“Remus has promised, under Ministry threat, to tell me about my parents and what they were like growing up.” The Brits had quietly come into the room now as well, and looked agog at what Harry had said, aside from the twins.

“Under Ministry threat?”

“During the Christmas holiday, I asked Travis to tell me about them, Mum and Dad, since he was only a year behind them in school and

played Quidditch with Dad. We had a nice talk about them, and he volunteered to force Remus into talking with me about them too.” Hermione and Ron both looked at each other, and Ron was the first to say it.

“We saw them talking about it Harry, we ran into them near the Gryffindor Common Room back in January.” Right after the Fudge capture, if Harry remembered the timeline correctly.

“Well he got right on it then, Travis is a good friend. Remus can’t come to Wizard America because of all the anti-Lycan wards, so it had to wait until I got back here.”

“You really don’t trust him?”

“No, he’s been too dependant on Dumbledore for too long, it’s just too risky. There’ll be Veritaserum during our conversation, I’ll make sure of that.” Neville couldn’t hide a smile, he rather liked the calculating version of Harry.

“What if he balks?”

“He won’t Neville, he’s too wary of what official pressure that Travis and The Minister could bring on him.”

“Was that part of your deal with them?”

“No Ron, that was before the Malfoy deal. Travis says he’s doing it out of righteous indignation more than anything else, that my family life has been kept from me. He told me that Minister Scrimgeour went along with it mainly as a favor to Travis himself, and to piss off Dumbledore if he could.” Fred interjected for a moment, before a Dumbledore bashing session could start, though he usually liked them.

“All of this political talk is fascinating of course, but this is our third day here and we haven’t explored the outside yet.” George chimed in.

“Yeah, due to someone’s need to secure the house first.”

“And who helped me secure the house? Complaining the whole time I might add.”

“Like you would have taken no for answer.”

“We didn’t want you saying I told you so.” Harry had a flashback to Rufus saying the same thing in his office the day before.

“Hey, I am no one’s boss here, you guys can do whatever you want.” Unless you start trashing the place, though he chose not to mention that.

“Get in the shower Junior, so we can go explore. You smell funny.”

“Yes Uncle George.”

Harry docilely allowed Sophie to lead him to the downstairs shower, where he was in and out in 10 minutes. Everyone was still in the library when he got back, and he addressed them briefly.

“Okay now, Bill told me that the nearest muggle hamlet is about a kilometer from here, so it’s not out of the realm that we might run into some stray muggles taking a hike or something. Keep your wands on you, but for the love of God don’t take them out unless you absolutely need them. The chances of a Death Eater attack are infinitesimal, and from what I gather, none of us are very good at Obliviation.” That was going to change during the month, as Sarah Westbrook had taken him aside and promised to work with him on acquiring that skill, but no one else. She didn’t want a load of powerful teenagers going on memory wiping sprees. Chaos ensuing would be the least of her worries.

“Are you going to booby-trap the outside at all?”

“ Yes Ginny, but not tonight, I want to get a lay of the land.....literally.” Harry wasn’t worried about the Death Eaters finding

them out there. Besides, even if they did, there would have to be a lot of Death Eaters with a very good plan in place to do the Hollow e-gang any serious damage.

They all walked out the front door and took a long look around. The Potter property was about three acres in total, though over half of it was forested, where James Potter had played as a child, and had gone exploring as a teenager with Remus, Sirius, and Pettigrew. There was an expansive lawn in front, freshly trimmed with a Lawn Care Charm that all house elves were capable of. The backyard was about half the size, and both the front and back lawns ended at the beginnings of forests.....or rather, Godric's Hollow was built right into the middle of one large forest. If Harry were to fully explore the library, as he planned to do come the weekend, he would find parchments that detailed the history of the Hollow, handwritten and added upon by each Potter who had lived there, and it was quite the lengthy list. There was even a small parchment done by James, though much of it was in Lily's handwriting as well.

The lot of them started into the woods in front of the house, and for awhile no one noticed the truly odd thing:

The quiet.

There were only a few animals about, and surprisingly not that many birds. Bill had taken a walk through these woods himself, checking for anything dangerous, but all he would tell Harry was that there were no dangerous animals about. He wanted Harry and company to experience this for themselves, the place was even more isolated than The Burrow. There was no hum from power lines or telephone lines, it was almost as if the Hollow was a blank spot in the middle of Wales. They saw a lot of tall trees, including a couple of apple trees somehow nestled in there, and there were lots of pinecones on the ground as well. Fred walked up next to Harry and Sophie.

"I don't think there's room enough for a Quidditch field in that yard of yours."

"Me neither, we'll have to play at The Burrow if we want a game."

“How did your talk with Hermione go?”

“As expected, but I think a détente was reached. She sure doesn’t like you two, that’s for sure. I wouldn’t plan on being groomsmen for her and Ron’s wedding.” Fred started cackling.

“I’d be suspicious if someone as button-downed as Hermione liked me.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about here.”

“Will things ever go back to the way they were with you three?”

“No, it’s worse than I thought. I wasn’t kidding mate, they blame you and brother George for more than we had realized.” Fred had assumed as much.

“That’s a little small don’t you think?”

“Well let’s not try to spin Ron in the air again if we can help it.”

“Don’t ruin our fun Harry. Remember, he got spun for a reason.”

“That’s lost on a few people if you’ll care to remember.”

“He’ll slip up, don’t worry, and then we’ll have some fun.” Harry was thinking the same thing, but Sophie intervened, though she didn’t much like Ron either.

“Just so that no one provokes him into slipping. Be the adults here guys.” Fred looked mock irritated at her.

“Yes Mum.” She patted him on the arm in a motherly way, she was very fond of the twins, and they of her.

Harry, wisely, stayed silent. He agreed with her though, and would have even if they didn’t share a bed nightly. He looked around as

they walked, and saw Jonas and Warrick coming back to them, the two of them had run ahead a little.

“We found a road up there, and a small park across the road and up a little ways.”

“How far would you say from the house?”

“I don’t know, maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile or so. Should we check it out?”

“Did anyone see you?”

“Nope, we stayed hidden enough, and we only saw a couple of cars pass by.” Sophie answered for Harry.

“Then no, we shouldn’t check it out. The last thing we want is for the locals to discover over 15 strangers, all around the same age and some with American accents, living in a house that no one can see. I wouldn’t even send one person to the grocery store in town, I’m sure a lot of questions would be asked that we don’t need.” Fred added something she hadn’t thought of.

“None of us speak the right accent here Sophie, our English ones would stick out almost as much. She’s right though. The park and town should be off-limits, it’s just begging for trouble. We can get our food through the grocers near Diagon Alley. We just send three people every day, and have Dobby and Winky waiting somewhere private to get it back.”

“Sounds like a plan, though you can deal me out of the shopping, I’ll just be the money man.”

“Well you do have more tutoring to deal with than the rest of us. I think we could have some nice picnics in here.”

“Actually Sophie, I was thinking more along the lines of Capture the Flag.” The second part of their lopsided duel series with the Seniors a few weeks earlier had given him the idea.

“That’s a good idea, as long as we carefully stack the teams.”

“Come the weekend, we’ll figure something out.”

“I thought we were going into muggle London?” Sophie and Harry turned to look at Fred, whose twin was with Angelina and Alicia about 20 meters away.

“You know that the weekend consists of two, very long, days, right?” And they weren’t even counting Friday night either.

“There is WWW work to be done Saturday thank you, we can’t have Seamus do it all you know. So Saturday doesn’t really count now does it? Besides, three of us have a League meeting, and Merlin knows how much of our afternoon that will waste.” They conceded the points. The catalogue business was still going on, as Dobby was scheduled to make stops at Salem, Tecumseh, and Great Lakes at least twice during July. A Pathfinder connection had been explored, using two of Josh Lyman’s nephews, but even Josh himself didn’t trust them for something like this, and Dobby reported back that he had not gotten a good vibe off of either one of them. So one school was out of the loop for WWW, though Harry still had some ideas for trying.

“We’ll do a Capture game Saturday after dinner, and then explore muggle London on Sunday. It might even make it more fun in the dark.” Sophie had a question, as George, Alicia, and Angelina wandered over to visit. Everyone else was spread out, by couples mostly, except for Drew, Reiko, and Ginny, who were talking Charms.

“Say Fred, how far outside The Burrow can you use battery powered things? Have you tried?” Indeed they had.

“About half a kilometer at least, give or take, if you’re on a straight line. It depends on how many people are there as well, that kind of magnifies the magical field. There’s a hill closer in, and once you’re over it, you can use the stuff. George and I tried with a transistor radio one time.”

“Yeah, after fourth year, Lee scammed the radio somehow for us.”

“Was that the hill we had to climb to get to the World Cup portkey?”

“No, that one was further out. This hill is just beyond the backyard and our beloved gnomes. What are you thinking Sophie?”

“Flashlights for Capture the Flag, a lot less risky than using Lumos, though any muggles that come across will still wonder at over a dozen strange teenagers suddenly dropped in their midst.” She filled the newcomers in on the plan for the weekend. It turned out that Angelina and Alicia went into muggle London all the time, and had some good ideas for shopping. Everyone came over now, there wasn’t much else to see beyond seemingly endless trees. Harry had an idea.

“Does anyone not know the way back to the house?” No one volunteered that they didn’t.

“Well then let’s race. First one back gets bragging rights, and no one can use magic.” This would be interesting, as there was one professional athlete, Angelina, and at least two more future ones in Harry and Jonas.....not even counting the twins and Alicia, who had declined athletic careers, though in Alicia’s case it was due to injury.

“On the count of three.” Something that happened a lot in Harryland., countdowns like this.

“One.”

“Two.”

“THREE!”

A mad sprint for the Hollow, as only Hermione started walking, everyone else was going fairly hard. It was about a kilometer to the

house from where they had started, just shy of 2/3 of a mile. Neither Great Lakes or Hogwarts had track teams, but the GL athletes in particular ran a lot as part of their winter workouts.

They had nothing on Angelina though, as she led almost the entire way before Jonas caught her halfway through the front lawn. He eased past and won the finish, with Angelina easily second. Harry wound up third, with Reiko and Luna, running together, rounding out the top five. The five of them sat on the front steps and mocked the later finishers. Luna in particular was hilarious:

“Come along Ronald, did someone put a Sticking Charm on your shoes?”

“You put one foot in front of the other Lee, that’s how it’s done!”

Warrick puffed in sixth, and Harry looked at his watch pointedly.

“Hey there boy, I’m 70 pounds heavier than you are on a good day, that’s a lot of weight to carry for that long a distance.” Very, very little of it was fat though. Physically, Warrick was Dudley, just with dark skin and 10 times the muscle, and a lot less fat.

“I guess we won’t be seeing you in Sydney in 2000.”

“I’m more of a sprinter thank you.”

“Says the man whose girlfriend whomped him.”

“I’ll ignore that.” That was one of Harry’s favorite rejoinders, which Warrick had taken to appropriating.

“I’ve taught you well in just a year.”

“It’s about time you taught me something, it sure wasn’t soccer.”

“Yeah, like I was encouraged to join any youth leagues by my child abusing aunt and uncle.”

“You should have blown them up years ago.” Warrick had nearly cracked a rib seeing the Aunt Marge episode via pensieve.

“Hindsight is always 20/20 isn’t it?”

“What would you know about 20/20 vision? Even that plant thing Neville got you hasn’t done the job there.”

“Easy for you to say Mr. Eagle Eyes, 20/30 suits me just fine for the time being.”

By now only Hermione was still out there, and still not in sight yet, Alicia and her perpetually achy back had just jogged in right behind Neville, who had somehow finished behind Claudia. Harry figured there was nothing to worry about, but better safe than sorry.

“Dobby!” The wee fellow popped in from the kitchen.

“Yes Harry?”

“Ronniki’s Hermione didn’t deign to race with us, go out there and make sure nothing happens to her okay?” He pointed to the direction where she must be, and Dobby was away. He came back in about five seconds, and Ron bolted upright. Dobby didn’t look too concerned though.

“I just wanted to report that Miss Hermione is walking as slowly as she possibly can, and that by my guess she should be another two minutes. I’ll go back now Harry.”

“Thanks Dobby.” Dobby left again, and Harry turned to Ron.

“She’s your girlfriend.” Ron’s response was equally sardonic.

“She’s your big sister.” Harry started chuckling.

“There are times when I like being reminded of that.....and this is one of them I guess.”

“Ronnikins’ Hermione? Was that really necessary.”

“No.”

That caught Ron short, and he joined in the laughter like the good sport he sometimes was.

“I’ll think up something to get you back for that.”

“Feel free, I’m just as whipped as you are I’m sure.” Harry didn’t really believe that, but Ron seemed convinced by it, especially as Warrick, Jonas, and Drew all made their feelings clear.

“No one is as whipped as Harry.”

“He won’t buy tampons though.”

“That’s the one place he draws the line.”

Harry explained the tampon running joke to those who hadn’t heard it, the women in particular were tickled by it. Warrick sized up Ron and Neville, and decided to see if either had a decent sense of humor.

“So Ron, Neville, where do you stand on the buying of tampons for your girlfriend? Yay or Nay?”

Neville cracked up, and Ron looked like he was wondering if he was being made fun of. Neville replied first.

“I haven’t had the opportunity yet, but I think my male ego can handle it.” Luna kissed the top of his head.

“That’s my man, brave to the last.” Drew was less jealous about that than he had figured he would be, he liked Neville so far, and realized

that he needed to find an American Luna. All eyes now turned to Ron, who decided to make his own joke.

“I don’t know if Hermione would trust me to do it, I might get the wrong kind. She’s kind of particular about those kinds of things.”

Harry started laughing so hard that he fell off the stoop, just as the woman in question was clearing the woods and starting up the yard. Ginny’s giggles were almost as uncontrollable, though she was already planning on getting Dean to buy her some tampons as soon as he got back, just to see.

“Oh that is so classic, that is so Hermione.”

“See baby sister, I do have a sense of humor.”

“Will wonders never cease.”

Hermione strolled up, having picked up the pace a bit once she got in sight.

“Did I win?”

“No Hermione, we all aged a year waiting for you.”

“I never did well in primary school races either.” Fred, having heard of her disapproval of his and his twins’ influence on young Harry, got in a zinger.

“There’s not some book that can teach you how to run?”

“At least one of us can spell ‘book’.” Ron was now the one cackling.

“Oh that was harsh.”

“Yeah, but our Gringott’s vaults can very easily be spelled, my dear Hermione.” That was one thing that Fred and George did separately, though everything was split equally.

“Money can’t buy happiness you know.”

“You obviously haven’t tried.” The twins looked like they were gearing up for more of this, and Harry didn’t want the fragile truce sundered any more than it had to be, so he stepped in.

“All right folks, the comedy is over. The group activities are through for the night, everyone enjoy themselves as best you can. Dobby and Winky will have dinner in the kitchen, just grab what you want.” And grab they did, the food budget for this adventure was going to need some restructuring. He had the money obviously, but he himself wasn’t the only one who ate a lot. Dobby and Winky, used to 15-20 hours per week before, were now doing that just with cooking, never mind cleaning and their WWW work. They didn’t mind though, they loved being in a house with so many people that they liked. Hermione, or so rumor had it, had gotten something of a stern lecture from Dobby about the expanded hours, though he approved of S.P.E.W in principle. She took the comments with more equanimity than Ron and Harry had thought, and didn’t make a deal of it.

After dinner, Harry and Sophie went to explore the back of the property, and found it much like the front. They cozied up against a large tree and just talked for awhile. Sophie loved the house, but couldn’t really imagine living there, while Harry was just glad he wasn’t experiencing the house by himself, or with just Ron and Hermione. There were a lot of memories there, and he was very slowly getting around to dealing with them.

Thursday, July 3, 1997

9:00 am

The morning was Harry’s first session with Tonks. He would be sharing it with Sophie and Neville, as Sophie was the only non-Brit going today. Tonks wanted Sophie’s first turn in public to be with Harry though, just in case something were to go down, she knew that her erstwhile friend would never forgive her if something happened to his girlfriend. Tonks put a couple of disguising charms on her charges,

and they slowly began to stroll around Diagon Alley. Orientation day had been Harry's first contact with Tonks since the reading of Sirius' will, so he naturally thought back to that day.

"So Tonks, what's been your big purchase? You have all that money now, did you splurge on anything?" She laughed.

"I bought the family a house, that's pretty big. Dear old Uncle Lucius and his boss probably weren't too happy with Mum for what she did. It's a nice place though, a better neighborhood than we were in before." Tonks, like so many magicals, was an only child.

"I'm still trying to picture a mother of yours being sister to those two, it really does defy the mind."

"Anymore than you and that Dudley being close relatives." Harry, with red hair and no glasses right now, took umbrage.....no pun intended, at that.

"Hey now, we are not close relatives. I'm a British male, and so is he, that's all we have in common, both in body type and in personality."

"Blood is blood Harry, you can't get around it. Your mum and his mum were sisters."

"Like your cousin Draco? How do you feel about his turnaround?"

"As long as he keeps his nose clean, I'm fine with it. I haven't talked to him or anything, if that's what you're asking." One small point.....

"Um, have you ever talked with him?" Tonks pondered that for a few seconds.

"No I haven't actually, Narcissa and Bellatrix dropped Mum right after she got engaged to Dad. Do you keep tabs on Dudley and his wonderful parents?" Where the hell was she going with this, thought Harry, Sophie, and Neville all.

“No I most certainly do not. I assume the old man will get word to me if they get killed or something.” That was said in such an uncaring tone of voice, that Tonks abruptly stopped.

“If we were talking about any other people on earth I would smack you for saying it like that, but I can’t, not with them.”

“No I won’t finish them off myself Tonks, so don’t bother asking.” She smirked at him.

“I bet I wouldn’t have been the first to ask though, would I?” Harry ticked the names off on his fingers.

“Let’s see: Molly, Arthur, Remus, Professors Murray, Ripley, and Greenleaf, Warrick.....am I forgetting someone?” Neville raised his hand.

“I think I was the first actually, the night you took down Snape.”

“Right, though I had just threatened their lives, so I don’t blame you mate.”

“Dumbledore has me check on Dudley once a month, he’s doing fine in school and isn’t the bully of the place anymore, in case you were wondering.” Harry shrugged, two weeks of semi-friendliness didn’t make up for 15 years of abuse as far as he was concerned.

“I wasn’t, but I’m glad he turned a corner at some point.”

“It’s never too late, the Dementors surely had something to do with it.” Harry then whispered in Tonks’ ear, where only she could hear him.

“Oh by the way Tonks, if you ever smack me for any non-humorous reason.....”

“Yeah?”

“Well I’m sure they’ll treat you just fine at St. Mungo’s, being a full-fledged Auror and all.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I surely would. I got smacked enough when I was a kid, by the people we’ve been talking about just now. I won’t tolerate it again. You know, ever.”

“You shouldn’t threaten people lightly Harry, you may be a fast draw, but I’m sure I could teach you a trick or two in a fight.” Harry saw the opening and took it.

“This time tomorrow, at The Ministry? Winner has the other’s wand for 30 seconds straight. No Dark or Unforgivable Curses, Travis can be referee.” She didn’t hesitate.

“Works for me, say 100 galleons wager?” Both were millionaires, so both could afford it without thinking.

“Sounds good, that should be fun.” Neither of them had that much respect for the other’s fighting ability. Tonks thought Harry was more hype than anything else, both of his major engagements recently had been with the benefit of Fred and George watching his back, which would allow anyone to focus on going on the offensive, not that she had seen either one, live or via pensieve. Besides, Tonks was as aware as anyone of Hogwarts’ DADA failures, Great Lakes couldn’t have taught him too much in just 10 months, while she had passed through the Auror Academy relatively easily. For his part, Harry thought Tonks was just a gimmick, no matter how she had done in Auror training. That said, he would gleefully kill to have her metamorph power.

After about 20 minutes of strolling along through Diagon Alley, more to show Sophie around than anything, they ventured into Knockturn Alley.

Knockturn Alley during the daytime is not that intimidating a place, as long as you felt and showed confidence. It helped if you were not well known, which would attract curious attention. All four of them were wearing robes with hoods, and Harry and Neville were under enough Disguising Charms so as to fool the casual onlooker, meaning that they shouldn't be worried. In theory, no one should have known what Sophie looked like at all, since The Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly had not, shockingly enough, stooped to sending photographers to shadow the gang during Flackter Alley visits. The Death Eaters had, but Voldemort was playing a wait and see game with Harry for the time being, rather than go after his friends. Tonks morphed herself into a teenager, so it just looked like four Hogwarts kids daring to go through the Dark Alley.

"Okay you three, the key here is to blend in. Make no moves that would cause you to stand out in the crowd. Avoid talking in loud or soft tones, loud tones tell everyone what you're saying obviously, but soft tones make people curious, and make them want to hear what you're talking about anyway. It's basically hiding in plain sight." Sophie was the only one who was scared actually, since there were no Knockturns in America, and she stayed out of the dodgier parts of muggle Milwaukee and Tulsa when she was with her friends. Neville and Harry just figured that no one would be brazen enough to attack them in broad daylight, whether they knew who they really were or not.

They walked along Knockturn for a full hour, just slowly enough not to repeat themselves too much in front of any one business, but just quickly enough to avoid suspicion. Tonks told them a lot of interesting little facts about Knockturn, including the most important of which was this: Just because a business was in there, didn't make it Dark. Knockturn was actually the larger of the two Alleys, and lot rentals were cheaper there too, given the reputation. Most of the property in Diagon/Knockturn was owned by about five magical families, including the McCrae's, the Shepherd's, and the Nott's. Fred, George, and Harry owned the WWW property by luck more than anything, buying it from a bankrupt trinkets store owner, whom the twins had run into on his way to Gringott's to sell the place.

After they were done with the walk through, Tonks took the disguises off them all, and they repaired to The Leaky Cauldron for a spot of lunch. She shared some of her recent Order/League experiences, and answered all of Sophie's and Neville's questions very thoroughly. Harry just sat there and listened, observing her and how she operated. She noticed his silence, and as they were digging into dessert, a plum pudding, she asked him about it.

"Cat got your tongue Harry? You haven't said five words since we sat down."

"I've been enjoying your spiel Tonks, you should be an instructor at the Academy." Harry sounded perfectly sincere, and Tonks answered him as such.

"Not for awhile I won't, the minimum age is 30, and you have to have 10 years as an Auror to boot."

"I did not know that, interesting."

"That's right, I hear you didn't get the tour when you were there with Travis."

"I sat in a really nice conference room, the chair was quite comfortable." Sophie and Neville cracked up.

"Hey, it was. The various Ministries funding the place clearly spared no expense."

For some reason, Tonks then decided to get a little confrontational, sensing that Harry was in a mood to answer some questions.

"Just out of curiosity, are you planning to invite Remus over to your new home anytime soon?" He had been waiting for this to come up, and was more than willing to do some verbal dueling with her.

"In point of fact I am Tonks, you and he both. You are a couple are you not?" Tonks colored a little, or she was about to change faces, it was hard to tell sometimes.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Au Contraire, I beg to differ.....which says the same thing, sorry. You just invited Remus into my home didn’t you? I believe I’m entitled to know if he’s bringing a guest.” She looked at the other two, and sure wasn’t getting any help from them.

“Would I be welcome? Me, the Dumbledore loyalist.”

“Sure you would, I’m not doing anything dodgy there, nor are any of my friends and family. You could show Dumbledore a pensieve memory of the entire evening and he wouldn’t learn anything new about me.”

“Besides, I swore an oath, didn’t I.”

“Yes you did, and I’m holding you and Remus both to it, for as long as Dumbledore and I both live.”

“I never had any doubt about that. Yet you still don’t trust us.”

“Tonks, I hate to break this to you, but no, I don’t trust you.....I barely know you. I trust that you won’t violate your oath, and I do consider you to be a friend, but there are limits. Besides, you don’t trust me either.”

“Why do you say that?” That wasn’t quite a denial.

“Because you barely know me, and you’re wary of any reckless intentions I might have, score settling-wise.”

“Can you blame me? Moody wonders out loud who you hate more, Dumbledore or Voldemort.” One positive thing Dumbledore had done was cut out this ‘He Who Must Not Be Named’ nonsense. No Order member was unwilling to say the word ‘Voldemort’ any longer, even Molly.

“Are you asking me the question?”

“Yes Harry, I am.”

“I don’t want Dumbledore dead Tonks, but I do want Voldemort dead. There’s your answer.” Again, an answer which technically speaking, avoided the question.

“Dumbledore doesn’t think so.”

“And I’m the last person on our side that cares about what Dumbledore thinks, believes, and wants. He had his chance Tonks, but ultimately he screwed the pooch on more than one occasion. He should be dead grateful I’m not a Death Eater right now.”

“He is Harry, believe me.” Harry carefully put down his spoon and proceeded to throw up his hands in the air, a bit theatrically.

“And he’s still not satisfied!? Talk about ingratitude, and I’ve not attacked him to boot. Some people, I tell you. Look me in the eye and tell me that I would have gotten a decent year’s education at that half assed school of his?”

“Remus, Flitwick, and McGonagall would have done just fine by you.” He wouldn’t concede a one of them.

“Remus is no Ripley, I’ve gotten enough letters from Neville, Luna, and Hermione to figure that out very easily. Remus is very smart, I’ll grant him that, probably having more brainpower than any magical I’ve seen not named Hermione.....but Ripley spent 15 years as an Auror, and I’ve learned quite a few cute little tricks and techniques from him, whereas Remus has relatively little practical experience. Flitwick and Maloney are more or less a wash, since I didn’t get to see him in NEWT teaching.....and McGonagall is a competent instructor, no more, no less. At least Wash doesn’t have a stick up his ass.”

“Does our Hogwarts measure up in any way? Or have you gone completely American?” Sophie raised her eyebrows at hearing this, but Harry was only surprised that he hadn’t gotten more of that in the last few days.

“Well the castle is nicer than our factory building.”

“Yes it is. Anything else?”

“That’s all you’re getting for now.”

“It’s quite enough.” Harry was getting tired of this line of conversation, and decided to try out an approach he had been planning to lay on Remus.

“Tonks, I want you to think about something, and I’m not saying this in any way to be condescending: Put yourself in my shoes one year ago today, and think about what I had gone through, and what I was facing. And then ask yourself what steps you would have taken to fix things. Now you might not have picked the options I did, but would you really have done nothing, and trusted the old man to make everything come out right?” The table was very quiet now, as Tonks considered that. Neville himself had done the very thing himself, the night Harry and Peter Tyson co-opted him into the grand scheme. He and Luna, while on the Knight Bus going home, had agreed that they would have done just what Harry did.

“Are you wanting an answer, or just for me to ponder it?”

“I’ll take what you give me Tonks, I don’t want us to be adversaries in the slightest.” She was dubious about that, but pushed on in spite of it.

“You want me as an ally? Against whom? Dumbledore? Voldemort? I know you don’t need me with The Ministry.”

“No, The Minister and I get along quite well, as do Travis and I.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“It works very well, I have nothing but respect for the both of them. In answer to your question though, I don’t need you as ally against Dumbledore, and I already have you as an ally against Voldemort. Not really a choice for you to make there, unless you go Dark.”

“Like that will ever happen.”

“Good, I can say the same.”

“Can you really? Your hatred of Dumbledore makes a few people wonder about that.”

“Let them wonder, Dumbledore didn’t kill my Mum and Dad, Voldemort did, and it wasn’t his idea to make Pettigrew the Secret Keeper either. To put Dumbledore first in the revenge line would be an insult to their memories, and I would probably pay some bad penance in the afterlife.” Tonks did ponder that for a moment, and then nodded.

“I see where you’re coming from, at least from a practicality standpoint. Will you join The Order?”

“No, I will never put myself willingly under the old coot’s thumb again.”

“Will you form a splinter faction? Or have you already?”

“Maybe, and not yet.”

“Keeping your options open are you?”

“Of course I am, this war might go on for years, and I might need to take a more pro-active role in things. I’m not asking you to forsake the old man Tonks, not at all, you should do what you feel is right. Do that, and I’ll accept it, and respect you for it.” Part of Tonks, not so deep down, had been hoping for a recruitment speech from Harry. She

knew that his magnetism could do a lot of things if he really was starting his own branch of The Order.

“All right then, and I appreciate the last part. So when are Remus and I coming over?” Not quite confirmation.....

“ How about Saturday afternoon? Molly, Arthur, Neville’s grandmother, and Luna’s father are all coming over for dinner. Remus and I don’t have to have the talk that night, and you can tell him as much, anytime this month will do, as long it does happen at some point.”

“So we’ll just come with you from The League meeting?” All non-duty Aurors were required to attend, and Tonks didn’t have the duty on Saturday.

“Sounds like a plan, the twins and I will be there with bells on.”

“You and those two, an unholy trinity if I’ve ever seen one.”

“If we weren’t already dueling tomorrow, I would suggest a three-on-three between the twins and I and your crew.”

“We have all month, let’s see what happens tomorrow.” Oh my yes, Harry thought, let’s see what happens tomorrow. The rest of the lunch went on to easier topics, as Harry and Sophie gave a short verbal history of their initial courtship. Neville also got ‘interviewed’, mainly about him and Luna, and whether Neville’s infamous grandmother approved of her.....it turned out that she quite did, she rather liked the image of her grandson smiling all the time, as who couldn’t smile if they were around Luna a lot.

The afternoon session for Harry was Rob Graham, and hand to hand combat. Recognizing that someone as small as Harry wasn’t likely to win any punching contests, Graham instead focused on Harry’s quickness, to avoid physical fights at all. He also taught him some techniques for extreme close quarters combat, such as eye gouging, and using a well placed heel into an opponent’s ankle. Graham, no

slouch at wandless magic in his own right, also promised to incorporate that kind of offense into their next session.

Friday, July 4, 1997

9:00 am

DMLE Combat Room

There were to be few direct witnesses to the duel today, as Tonks was just wary enough to insist on it. Watching today would be Travis, who was 'refereeing', Sophie, Bones, and the rest of Tonks' crew: James Bamber, her crew leader, and Kate Sackoff, the second most senior member of the crew, Tonks being among the oldest of the junior people in Auror Command. Rufus had expressed an interest in watching, but Travis had successfully talked him out of it, saying that however much The Minister may like Harry, Tonks was still a loyal DMLE employee and there needed to be an appearance of impartiality. Likewise Dumbledore had not been allowed to attend, as Tonks bluntly told him that if he showed up, Harry would either attack the both of them, or call the entire thing off. She promised to show him a pensieve memory of it though.

Travis took the floor and addressed everyone.

"All right then. We have here a limited Wizard's duel between Nymphadora Tonks and Harry Potter. This duel is strictly for training purposes, and both of them have assured me that there is no ill will between them, only a desire to see what the other is made of." Distrust wasn't ill will was it? Well to a degree anyway. Travis continued.

"Only one wand per person is to be used, and of course nothing lethal is to be used, nor any spectators targeted or used as props. Tonks, Harry, you both ready." Harry wanted no part of bringing Riddle's wand into this building if he could help it. He nodded his head at Biller, as did Tonks.

"I am."

“You bet.”

“Take your places, and don’t move until I give the word.” They did as ordered, standing eight meters apart, and Harry eyed Tonks as would a lion observing a giraffe. He decided, after the slight roasting she had given him about Remus yesterday, that she deserved a hiding. Dumbledore needed to be sent a message.

Not that kind of hiding, though Harry found Tonks to be quite attractive. If there was no Sophie.....

“Begin!”

Harry and Tonks both went for the jugular right off, as he flashed a Stunner right at her forehead, and she aimed the same spell at his feet. Neither was close though, as Tonks threw herself to her left as soon as she heard Bill start to say ‘begin’, only barely aiming the spell in Harry’s general direction. Harry’s Stunner landed right where Tonks would have been if she had hesitated even a millisecond, though hers was a meter off the mark, and he didn’t have to move. He had planned for her dodging though, and his next move was swift and decisive. He whipped his wand over to her direction, and screamed out.

“ACCIO TONKS!”

She flew toward him, and halfway there, Harry flashed his left hand at her twice:

“Repulsar.”

“BLUGARDO!”

He used the Pulse Spell somewhat silently, while he made a point of screaming the Banishing Charm. The Pulse hit her on her right hand, forcing her to drop her wand, while the Banishing Charm slammed into her sternum and threw her into the wall behind her, a distance of about five meters.

“Accio wand!” Tonks wand flew into his left hand, and just to make his point:

“Petrificus Totalus!” That wound up freezing her in place, the impact on the wall not having knocked her out, and she was starting to get up.....and stopping.

The entire ‘duel’ took less than 20 seconds.

The reactions from the crowd were more telling than anything:

Sophie was smiling very large as her boyfriend decimated his foe, she couldn’t wait to see what he could do against somebody who was actually good at dueling.....though he had shared the results of his Travis workout with her. She had thought Tonks to be nice enough during their morning and lunch, but thought that the other woman had a little too much to prove to Harry. And said woman still did.

Bones just stood there, flabbergasted. Unlike Tonks, she had seen Harry fight at the Malfoy trial, but this was beyond anything she had anticipated. The DMLE Head made immediate mental plans to beef up the dueling curriculum at the Auror Academy. Perhaps Harry could teach it once he graduated? Surely the Governing Board for the Academy would relax it’s tenure rules for something like this, wouldn’t they? It would be an attractive way of getting Harry to work for the DMLE, and they could even work around his Quidditch schedule. She would make a beeline for Rufus’ office to talk with him about this.

Bamber and Sackoff, neither of them expert duelists themselves, were half disquieted, if this was the best that Tonks could do against some 16 year old kid, and half impressed with Harry’s brutal efficiency, there had been no wasted motion in his attack, and his speed and power were very impressive. Bamber would later schedule refresher training in dueling for all three of them, to commence immediately.

Travis, fully aware that Tonks was one of Dumbledore’s people inside his Auror Command, was full of nothing but glee as his sort of

protégé slaughtered his foe. He did like Tonks as a person though, and was the first to hurry over and see that she was alright.

She was, and after being unfrozen, she limped over to Harry to get her wand back. It seemed she had bruised her knee upon impacting the wall, but otherwise wasn't injured, though her sternum had a reddish mark from where Harry had nailed her with Blugardo.

"Okay, you got me Harry. That was impressive, I have to admit." The tone of the words wasn't as grudging as the words themselves suggested.

"Are you okay? I was trying to knock you off balance, not hurt you."

"Well you did both, but nothing's broken, and you didn't use anything remotely Dark, so I don't have a leg to complain on, do I?"

"Well no."

"I'll bring the 100 galleons tomorrow, I'm sure it'll help you with your food bill." That was a nice idea, but Harry had other plans for the cash, as he explained to the bemused onlookers.

"It would, but I'm going to force Dobby and Winky to take it as a summer bonus. They'll argue, much to my amusement, and then I'll just order them to accept it, and the looks on their faces as they struggle with that will be all the entertainment I'll need for the day." Sophie couldn't help it anymore and started giggling, which in turn brought open smiles to the faces of the others.

"What's the spell you hit my hand with? It was just powerful enough to make me open it up, but I barely feel a twinge in it now."

"It's something the American Auror Command came up with, Repulsar. My mate Drew's dad is the Mid-West Auror Command Head, and he taught it to Drew, who taught it to the rest of us. You can spit it out rapidly, and it doesn't drain you very much magically. I used it a lot at the Malfoy trial, and during our Lycan invasion as well, I've become quite attached to it."

The assembled group spent some time afterward rehashing the Malfoy trial, Bamber's crew having worked against Voldemort's rearguard. Harry explained why he had chosen which strategy when, such as collapsing the ceiling and using the snakes.....neither of which really worked beyond buying some time and creating diversions, but were still lauded because he thought on his feet. He learned a bit more about how an Auror crew functioned together, and he got along well with Bamber and Sackoff, both of whom had graduated Hogwarts before he got there. It broke up at a little after 11:00 am for lunch, and Harry was due for a session with Mike Peplowski afterward, with Sophie doing more Apparition work. Travis, having a lunch meeting to go to, stopped Harry and Sophie on their way out.

"Harry, I don't know if I'll have a chance to talk to you before the League meeting tomorrow, but I just wanted to say be careful in there."

"With Dumbledore?"

"Not just him, with some of the retired Aurors and others as well. I'm not saying you need to kiss the hems of their robes, but don't let them provoke you. No matter how powerful and talented you are, to some of them you're just a punk kid who's too big for his britches. Now the people in there that count most, like Bones, The Minister, your friend Arthur, they don't believe that for a second, so please keep that in mind."

"Maybe you could leak out about how I took out Tonks." Travis immediately started shaking his head at that.

"That would barely help you, if at all, and would harm her a lot. Let's face it, some people don't care about what you've done, they only care about form and tradition. You know I have your back, and so do the others I mentioned....." Harry held up a hand and stopped him.

"That's all I need to here mate, and you know that I have yours too, right?" Travis smiled, and they shook hands.

“That’s good to hear. Now I have to get going, I have a lunch meeting with Craig Parker from the Academy. Have fun with Pep this afternoon, I’m sure you’ll pick up some useful things with him.”

“I will, thanks. See you tomorrow.” Biller was off, and Sophie and Harry joined Tonks for lunch again at The Leaky Cauldron. Things now seemed to be settled between Harry and Tonks, as she now had a better idea of what he was capable of, and he was very impressed that she had taken her shellacking like an adult. It helped that they got along on a personal level, and Harry was now no longer dreading the Saturday dinner as much.

In the afternoon session Peplowski taught Harry more about rapid firing than he ever thought he needed to learn. It turned out that quick reflexes were only a part of it. A lot depended on posture, and what kind of stance and footwork one used. Pep, strangely enough, was the Auror with the fastest rate of fire even though he was by far the largest of the bunch, at 6’9”, fully four inches larger than Rob Graham, the second biggest. Harry took one look at him up close and decided that this was not a man that he wanted anger if he could help it, but they got along fine. Peplowski was another former classmate of his parents, one year ahead of Travis, and he had some funny stories to tell about Lily and James both, as well as the other Marauders.

He also knew about The Map, and asked if Harry had made one for his current school. Barely covering his astonishment:

“How did you know about that?”

“I came in on them once, I had been with my girlfriend and got back before they expected. They didn’t hide it quickly enough, though I never let on that I saw anything. Luke didn’t know about it, I don’t think, or at least he never said anything.” Maurice Lucas had been the other boy in that room for seven years, along with the four Marauders and Peplowski. Relations between the Marauders and their other roommates had been very cordial, but no lasting friendships had been made. Given the tenuous bond that they shared though, due to his father and all, Harry quizzed the huge man about

some behind the scenes business in Auror-land, and about Riddle Manor. Some highlights:

“Is Travis the best Auror of the bunch? No, I’d say Sanford Jenkins to be honest with you, but he’s not very good with Rufus and Amelia. Which I guess makes him not the best, since dealing with higher-ups is a large part of our job now. Travis somehow accomplished being liked by both Fudge and Rufus, they both could count on him to go after the enemy, and you’d be surprised how uncommon that is.”

“Ah Umbridge, she couldn’t even use her wand under most circumstances. We always laughed at her behind her back whenever she came round the DMLE. I know she had informants in there, but they were so pathetically easy to spot that they did her no good at all.”

“Don’t cross Rufus if you can help it Harry, he may seem all jovial and everything, but he’s ruthless if he needs to be. Be glad you have Travis on your side there, I’m sure he’s been singing your praises. Those two are very tight, I’ve often wondered if they’re cousins or something.”

“Just remember to always deal with Bones as if you’re working with a leaky case of dynamite on a hot summer day.....if you don’t caulk it very slowly, it might blow up and kill you. Her temper is legendary, though she always does it behind closed doors.”

All of this was done during rest breaks, as their session took them all the way up to 5:00 pm. The older man didn’t have Riddle Manor duty tonight, there were seven crews rotating on six hour shifts, so he and Harry floored to WWW, where Pep got some WWW stuff for his oldest daughter, a third year to be Hufflepuff that Harry had no memory of whatsoever. Ryla Peplowski couldn’t wait to join the DA, though who would be leading it was a topic of some discussion as Harry helped his tutor pick out some things.

That night everyone went to the cinema, for a showing of The Fifth Element, the new sci-fi movie starring Bruce Willis. This was the first movie theater experience for Ron, Neville, and Ginny, and Ron in

particular had to be forcibly silenced when he started yelling at the screen. In Ron's defense, he learned that from Jonas and Harry while watching videos, as they were always doing that, Jonas having taught Harry. Luna, anticipating the commentary process on DVD's, gave a whispering one to Neville for the entire movie.....except when Chris Tucker was on screen, the character was too weird even for her, and she would grow quiet. A fun time was had by all, as they found a video game arcade for some more enjoyment. It was basically a teenager type night out on the town, and everyone's troubles, if they indeed had any, were forgotten for a few hours. Only a few hours though, as most of them had tutoring in the morning.

Saturday, July 5, 1997

11:50 am

WWW

The WWW three stared at each other, contemplating things. They were about to leave for the League meeting, Arthur meeting them there, when Bill arrived.

"Are you people ready to go?" Harry, slouching against the main counter:

"We're resting Bill, don't bother us. Some of us were up at 7:00 am thank you."

"A bunch of lazy duffers you are. I'm always up that early, bankers' hours." George stared at him with mock hostility, and had a notion:

"All those in favor of telling Gringotts that we're yanking our business unless they fire this git, raise your hands." All three raised their hands.

"Funny, very funny. What are we waiting for?"

"Do you see anyone here to man the counter?" Bill looked around, indeed he did not. Ginny and Ron had just left 10 minutes earlier,

having taken care of things during the morning shift, while the three of them were with Sarah Westbrook.

“Who’s on duty today?”

“Mum, Lee, and Claudia. I don’t even want to know what Lee and Claudia are up to, since Junior here won’t let us put any Listening Charms in their room, and I don’t know where Mum has gotten to.”

“Hey now, you both agreed about no Listening Charms.”

“It was reluctant agreement at best Harry.” Just then the floo fired, and Molly came tumbling through.....quite a sight.

“Sorry I’m late dears, Dean was on the floo and I had to take a long message for Ginny.”

“How’s his world tour going?”

“Very well, he’s still in Scotland for the day though, in Edinburgh. Not a good floo connection though I must say. Well off with you, I’m sure the others will be along soon.” Molly was getting the hang of working in the shop now, and made a fuss over as many customers as she could. This was the one avocation of her children that she could share in, as she was petrified of dragons, and was a little claustrophobic when it came to tombs.....she had very patiently listened to all of Percy’s talk about cauldron bottoms though too. Molly did love Quidditch though, even if she had three professional level sons who had all refused to actually turn professional. She told them to have a good meeting, and that she would see them later on at Godric’s Hollow, as she would only be at WWW for a couple of hours. The League meeting wouldn’t last that long, would it? Harry and the twins started whispering furiously to each other before Bill corralled them and started pushing them out the door.

“C’m on you three, no more delaying, on to The League.” Bill had gotten his invitation right after the Malfoy trial fiasco, and unlike Harry had accepted right away. Being an Order member was not an automatic invitation though, so Molly was not attending, and Arthur

only because he was now so senior in The Ministry, and had an automatic membership by being in the Wizengamot.

The walk to The Leaky Cauldron only took a couple of minutes, and they ran into Remus and Tonks at the front door.....the magical front door it should be said, not the gateway door to muggle London. This was the first that Harry had seen of Remus since the Malfoy trial, though a couple of letters had been exchanged.

“Well Harry, you seem to have grown an inch since I last saw you.”

“Half an inch, though I’m grateful for every bit of it.”

“How are things at the house?”

“Astonishing good, I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop. You’ll meet everyone this afternoon, been quite awhile for you too, since you’ve been to Godric’s Hollow.” Quite the long time, if he remembered right.

“Yes it has, yes it has. I’m looking forward to seeing what you’ve done with the place.”

“Oh very little, other than a television and some assorted wards.” None that he would give the name or consequence to, at least to anyone who didn’t live there. The six of them walked into the pub, and Remus led them to the private dining area, where the meeting would be held.

Tom’s private dining room was magically enhanced to be rather huge. It contained one large table, as round as the one in the King Arthur tales, and Harry got the sense that he would have to shout if he wanted to make himself heard to the room at large during this meeting. Most of the League seemed to be there already, though Rufus and Dumbledore weren’t as yet. The six of them found Arthur, and sat down next to him. Harry was sitting next to his surrogate father figure Arthur, with George on his other side. Soon enough, Rufus, Bones, and Travis all came in together, with Dumbledore and McGonagall seconds behind them.

Dumbledore was the titular Head of the League, though the position was more ceremonial than anything. Power to appoint members lay with The Minister and the DMLE Head, in consultation with Dumbledore.....though this Head was not an offshoot of his being Head of the Wizengamot, he just happened to have been appointed many years earlier, and the title and job had stuck. The League met once a year on the average, before Rufus had de-mothballed it anyway, and most members had never bothered to show up. Not now though, as the room was filled with older looking Wizards and Witches. If not for the WWW three, Bill would have been the youngest non-Auror in the room right now.

As Dumbledore took his seat at the table, there really wasn't one place that could be called the head of it, he glanced briefly at Harry. The look didn't last long however, and the old man's facial expression never changed. Harry anticipated another meeting request in his near future, and was wondering if perhaps today was the best day to do it, get it over with. He leaned over to George.

"Tell me bro, what's the downside to doing my Dumbledore thing today?" George's lips barely moved in reply, as now McGonagall and Flitwick were both staring very pointedly at them.

"I thought the idea was to get a little more of that training, just in case." In case Dumbledore risked everything for a snatch attempt, however unlikely.

"Yeah, but it'll catch him by surprise if we do it today."

"Mate, I wouldn't. You've Remus and the others coming over, that's enough emotional turmoil for the day don't you think?" Harry thought on that for a second, and then nodded his head.

"You're right, only so many battles to fight in one day. Thanks."

"I'm here to help."

Just then, Dumbledore cleared his throat, and somehow managed to project his voice without Sonorus, and everyone heard him just fine.

“All right, let us commence our July meeting of The Dark Force Defense League. First off, we have three new members of The League joining us today, sponsored by Minister Scrimgeour and Head Auror Biller. Fred Weasley, George Weasley, and Harry Potter are known to us all of course, as owners of a successful joke shop, WWW, and as outstanding Quidditch players. They also played a major role in the defense of The Ministry at the Malfoy Trial Attack, and Fred and George were key players in the Battle of Hogsmeade Village. They also fought American werewolves during the invasion of Mr. Potter’s school back in February. They are battle tested and will add much to our efforts. Welcome Fred, George, Harry.” All three, upon a pre-arranged plan, rose from their seats and gave half bows, saying in unison:

“Thank you Headmaster.”

Ahh the Weasley triplets, though the thanks was said respectfully. Harry had no real desire to chop the old man down in front of this large a crowd. Not unless he was provoked anyway.

The respectful gesture was lost on a number of people, mostly over the age of 60, who looked over them with a degree of contempt. One of them, retired Auror Lance LeGault, stood up and gestured derisively.

“I was under the impression that joining this League was supposed to be an honor, not a political payoff. To say that these pups, none of whom graduated from Hogwarts, are fit to defend our populace is an insult to all of us who earned our way in here.” All eyes turned to Harry and the twins, who were something at a loss for words. Harry knew that he would be judged badly no matter what he said, so he chose to say nothing at all. Fred and George weren’t about to respond before Harry, so they kept quiet as well, even though they dearly wanted to point out that they had actually graduated from somewhere. Dumbledore looked at Harry approvingly, and spoke:

“Direct appointments to this body are the purview of The Ministry, but I for one welcome their participation. Their practical experience fighting werewolves and Death Eaters will only make us more effective.” Rufus then cleared his throat, and eyed LeGault with distaste. Their tenures in Auror Command had overlapped, and there was no love lost between them.

“The WWW partners are here via my direct request, and they will be given the respect that everyone here expects. Anyone who doesn’t like it is free to leave right now, I’ll be happy to forward notice of your cowardice to The Daily Prophet, for inclusion in tomorrow’s edition.” Harry quickly did some Occulmency exercises, to avoid breaking out into laughter, and the twins had practiced poker faces from dealing with their mother all these years.

No one took Rufus up on his offer of course, though several would talk to him about it afterward. Dumbledore gave a nod of thanks to his somewhat adversary, and moved on with the meeting. The first piece of the agenda was the regular reports from abroad, and whether or not their troubles were somehow finding their way to Britain, be it independently or in concert with the bad man. Nothing new was reported, though Davey Hando in Australia had been punted off Tasmania and was now currently hiding in the Australian Outback.....just 30 kilometers from where Fudge was as it happened, though no one knew that. Xiong Ni in China, the other main Dark threat, had nothing new going on in his sector, as the Chinese Wizard Alliance basically left him alone to do what he wished.

Following these brief reports was a discussion on the Voldemort/Greyback war, and how to exploit it for their side. Rufus and his people had been light on the details in the past, but this time laid the full scenario out for them, though at no point had they ever mentioned Riddle Manor in the equation. Dumbledore knew about it; he had even said a muted ‘I told you so’ to Bones, but that was it. The debate soon raged over whom to favor, and there was considerable support for Greyback and the werewolves in the room, particularly from the younger ones in the room. They all saw Remus, and figured that if one of them could stay ‘normal’, then they all could. The older members were too circumspect to vocally favor the Death Eaters, but

disguised that sympathy by saying that the League should let the two sides kill each other, rather than trying to nudge one or the other into victory. Harry and the twins kept silent until the end, when Auror Sanford Jenkins brought up the possibility of the werewolves using muggle weapons, as had happened in the States. He asked Harry:

“I don’t know if this was ever made public, but where did they wind up getting those weapons that they used against you?”

“From a muggle army base called Fort Bragg, in North Carolina. They used Imperious and forced the commander to open up the weapons storage for them. At least that’s what the Auror Command over there agreed was mostly likely. We know for a fact that the weapons came from Fort Bragg though.” LeGault, as his name suggested, wouldn’t let it go.

“We? I didn’t realize the Americans held you so high as to share that kind of information with you?” Harry simply smiled at the man, while all the time plotting his painful death.

“I was appointed to a commission to study bolstering the defenses at the four schools and five Alleys. During the commission meetings, which are still held once a month, we got this information and more like it. President Chabon wanted a student on the commission to give firsthand knowledge of how students were likely to react to any changes. And since I personally killed four Lycan attackers and captured one other, he felt that my input would be valuable.” That last sentence was said very pointedly, causing Rufus to start chuckling. This only made LeGault more angry, but he didn’t respond. Dumbledore smiled genially, he didn’t like LeGault that much either, and addressed another question to Harry.

“Harry, did you get a sense of any exploitable weaknesses during your battle?” Just as genially, Harry replied.

“Yes Albus I did. I found that in a pitched battle, their reflexes and speed are no match for our wands, with or without their use of firearms. As you lot found out in Hogsmeade, any place that we can control the battlefield, they won’t stand a chance if our numbers are

even close to theirs.” That brightened up quite a few faces, hearing that of course Wizards were superior. They knew of the Hogsmeade rout of course, but that was a tiny sample size.

“Thank you Harry.”

Talk then turned to Death Eater recruitment, and likely targets for any future raids. There were a lot of pseudo-speeches going on, and Harry was reminded of listening to the muggle Parliament on the wireless. He discretely checked his watch, and was appalled to find that over two hours had been wasted on this nonsense. His deal with Rufus was clear: He had to endure this every month, and he was only praying that any school year meetings wouldn't cause him to miss Flackter Alley trips. Things droned on for another two interminable hours, and then Dumbledore adjourned the meeting. Harry and the twins walked over to Rufus, who was huddling with Bones about something.

“Well Harry? What did you think?”

“I think I didn't request enough favors, if I have to sit through one of these every month.” Bones turned her head so that Harry couldn't see her grinning. Rufus' grin was very sardonic.

“Welcome to my life Harry, where I have meeting after meeting of people telling me my business.”

“You could always go back to being Head Auror. Maybe you and Travis could trade places.” Rufus glanced around for his protégé, but he had already left.

“Don't think that hasn't occurred to me.”

“Is that old man going to be a problem?” The room hadn't been introduced, and Arthur was unclear about who he was as well.

“No, he's mostly talk. He was a fine Auror back in the day, not as fine as he thought he was, but still a good soldier. Our friend is coming over, you handled him very deftly I must say.”

“Thank you, no need to air our dirty linen, however droll, in public.” Rufus had rarely been more impressed by Harry than he was after hearing that.

“Quite so Harry, quite so.”

Our friend was Dumbledore, and he walked up to them, by himself.

“Well Harry, how are you settling into Godric’s Hollow?”

“It’s going very well Albus, thank you.”

“Are your American friends getting with your British ones?” Harry was amazed that Dumbledore thought he’d get a straight answer to that one.....or maybe the man just couldn’t think of anything to say. His tone stayed polite, just to mess with the older man’s mind.

“Well Lee Jordan is now dating my friend Claudia, so they’re getting along splendidly. No fights have broken out, if that’s what you’re asking.” Fred nudged him in the ribs, and mouthed ‘Star Wars’ to him.

“Oh right, thanks Fred. There was a bit of a row when Ron and Neville started playing Star Wars on the VCR at 4:00 in the morning on Thursday, at full volume. We put up a Silencing Bubble though, and they were happy as clams. Was that what you had in mind?”

“Very interesting, very interesting. Harry, Miss Granger was telling me all about your Olympic program over there at Great Lakes, I was hoping that you and I might speak about that during the talk you alluded to us having sometime this month.”

“I would be more than happy to encourage a Hogwarts version Albus, it was a lot of fun. No danger of course, and I somehow managed not to get kidnapped this time, but there you go.” He got the visual pleasure of Dumbledore stiffening, but no other reaction.

“I will take my leave then, I look forward to our meeting Harry.” Just what he had said the last time, but he wasn’t making a deal of it, so Harry threw him a bone.

“You will get your meeting Albus, assuming things stay as they are.” A pleased look washed across the man’s face, and Harry figured that he had bought himself some peace and quiet on that front for a couple of weeks. Besides, he could always changed his mind if it came to it.

“Very well Harry. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

“And you as well.” Dumbledore swept off, meeting his senior teachers at the door and departing with them, presumably back to Hogwarts.

Remus and Tonks had been talking quietly with Arthur while this was going on, and now came over.

“Well, no violence between you two.”

“I’m too tired to kill anyone Remus, I had to get up early this morning.” Remus wasn’t used to Harry the Humorous, and an uncomfortable smile set on his face. Mentally giggling, Harry turned to Rufus.

“Speaking of dinner time at Godric’s Hollow, would you care to join us Minister?”

“That’s very kind of you Harry, but I’m going to be babysitting my goddaughter tonight. Travis and Rebecca are going out on the town, and I’m going to look after young Maya.” The image of the Minister of Magic babysitting gave everyone listening a little bit of pause. The pleased look on his face made all the difference though, sometimes the little things make us happiest. The Biller house elf was perfectly capable of looking after Maya, but Rufus had no children of his own, and like the idea of spending time with her.

“You can all think it, but don’t say it. How does Monday night work for you Harry?” He found the prospect of dining with all of those teenagers to be very amusing.

“Sounds great, I’ll stop by your office after my tutoring and we’ll portkey over.” The two men shook hands, and Harry’s party walked out of The Leaky Cauldron so that they could close up the shop and collect Lee and Claudia. Remus was quiet throughout, just listening and getting used to Harry again. Tonks had assured him that ‘the talk’ didn’t have to happen tonight, but he was still wary of the ‘new’ Harry.

They got to the shop, and waited for Molly to floo over, as well as Neville’s grandmother and Luna’s father. Remus was not a regular shop visitor and took the time to poke around. He had gotten 16 Harry Potter’s DIY Howlers from various students over the course of the year, mostly from Slytherins who just wouldn’t let it go. He got to be pretty good at quickly cleaning off jam, and delighted in the irony of Slytherins paying Gryffindor alumni for something.

The three parental units came within five minutes of each other, and soon all of them took the portkey ride to Godric’s Hollow. Once inside, Harry left them for a moment to go get Luna and Neville, while everyone else started poking around. Molly headed straight for the kitchen, she had brought a couple of bags of food to help Dobby and Winky, and the three of them could soon be heard chattering away. Nora Longbottom and Bruce Lovegood were soon introduced to everybody, but where was Remus? Harry had a feeling, and went to investigate.

Remus was in what Harry now referred to as ‘The Death Room’. He was visibly shaking, clearly Sirius had told him his theories as well, or the werewolf had formulated ones of his own. He turned at Harry’s approach.

“I don’t know if I can do this Harry.”

End Chapter

Author's Note: I made a small name screw-up long ago, in that I gave the junior Herbology teacher the name of Ryan Chappelle, and later gave that name to one of the Lycan invasion Quodpot players, one of the two that were killed. No one noticed, but I believe in full disclosure, so let's just pretend that the Herbology teacher is really named Paul Schulze.....who played Ryan Chappelle on 24. One small point that should be made in regard to characterization: My Hermione, in this particular story, is based on the Hermione in the films, a character much softened from the books. Likewise my Remus is based on the one in the books, not the one in the Azkaban movie that has all these long walk and talk scenes with Harry but doesn't tell him anything about his family other than vague generalizations. It's my feeling that Hermione and Remus are the characters that shift the most between book and film, and I've decided to pick one style to write them in rather than merge them. Since Remus is out front more in the next two chapters, I felt I should explain the method to my madness a little bit.

Saturday, July 5, 1997 continued

Godric's Hollow

5:00 pm

"I don't know if I can do this Harry." Remus looked like he was about to sink to his knees.

Harry contemplated that for a second, to give Remus a little more time to collect himself. He knew what the man was going through, he vividly remembered his first time in this room just five days ago, it had taken Drew to snap him out of it. They were probably the only two people in the world that this room would have that kind of effect on.....though the devil in Harry would love to subject Peter Pettigrew to it, before his timely death anyway.

"Do what Remus? Be in this house? This room?"

"Both, how do you do it?" Harry assumed that the other man wanted candor, so he gave it to him.

“The house is easy, since I always have at least a dozen friends with me in it, all of whom I love dearly. I feed off their energy and emotions, and it helps so much I can hardly find the words to tell you. The room? I spend 10 minutes in here every day, by myself. I cry some, I yell some, and I spend some time contemplating the sweet prospect of revenge. Five days so far Remus, I haven't done my duty today yet. Each time I leave the room I'm more invested in killing Voldemort, Pettigrew, and anyone that gets in my way of dealing with those two.” A bit cold perhaps, but Remus could understand it by and large.

“It's that easy?”

“We're all different people Remus, what works for me might not work for you. And no, it's not easy, just easy to explain. I was just as wrung out yesterday as I was the first day.”

“I can almost hear Lily.”

“I can too, probably better than you can.”

“You have memories of her speaking? You were only 16 months old.”

“Her dying is what I heard when the Dementors came. It was very vividly reproduced, my subconscious deserves an Oscar for Sound.” Remus had quite forgotten that, the year that he had taught Harry seemed so long ago.

“Did Voldemort show you any of it when he was sharing your mind?” Harry shook his head.

“No, thank goodness. He wanted the Prophecy, but perhaps he was thinking of a future recruitment.....and don't say it, I don't give a shit what kind of conspiracy theories Moody has been floating to you people: no offer has been made, nor will any offer be accepted.” Remus looked like he was gaining his composure back.....the whole point of Harry saying what he had said.

“I didn’t say anything Harry, and I wouldn’t have. I know you won’t cross over.”

“You’re damn right I won’t Remus, any more than you could, or Sirius could. Not after what he did to Mum and Dad.” Remus came to a decision.

“I know you told Tonks that we didn’t have to speak of that tonight, but I’m ready if you want to.” Harry had been thinking the same thing all afternoon, until he came into the room and saw his parents’ friend about to come apart at the seams. Deciding that Remus needed a break, he chose not to call his bluff.

“No Remus, let’s make it a night of friends and leave that for later. I’m due back in Michigan the day after my birthday, we have until then to talk.” Harry took the other man’s arm and gently led him out of the room, where Tonks and Sophie were waiting for them, having listened to the entire exchange. Tonks, still unwilling to out herself and Remus as a couple, had been afraid that Harry would tear Remus a new one as soon as they were alone. She shot Harry a grateful look behind her man’s back, as he continued the conversation.

“Before or after you talk with Dumbledore?”

“Before, I want to hit him with as much as I can. You can be at the meeting if you like.” That startled Remus a little.

“So it won’t be private?”

“I wouldn’t meet with that man alone for all the gold in Gringotts.” Good thing Fred and George weren’t in earshot, or such an offer would soon be winging its way to Dumbledore.

“You don’t honestly think he would try anything now, do you? The Minister would send the entire Auror Command in after you, and Dumbledore knows it. Everyone knows that you and Rufus are allies now.” Travis had told Harry of Remus’ shot at him: ‘You can

challenge Dumbledore and stick up for Harry because you have always had Rufus Scrimgeour to hide behind', or words to that effect. Far from seeing that as a bad thing, Harry fully planned to take advantage of that if he could for his own part.

"Funny how everyone is willing to bet my life on these types of things."

"He would never harm you Harry, he believes in the Prophecy too much." Harry then asked the question:

"What about you Remus, what do you believe?"

They were now in the main living room, where there was enough furniture now that everyone could eat in their own spaces, rather than cramming a long table in there. Remus stopped in the doorway and gave Harry his view.

"I think neither of you can live while the other survives. It's become a self fulfilling prophecy even if Trelawney was full of dung, and I honestly don't know whether she is or not. Voldemort knows that much of it, and he'll come for you at some point. The only wildcard is 'the power he knows not'. I know you don't believe in that, and maybe you're right to, I don't know Harry."

"Why would he come for me? He's left me alone thus far, not counting Goyle's idiot father."

"He's been busy wiping out squibs and engaging in dubious alliances with my fellow werewolves. In a sense he's behaving as if the battle is already won, and he's preparing for the reign afterward by getting rid of some loose ends ahead of time. I don't know if that's how I would do it in his position, but it's certainly a way to go. Don't worry though Harry, he'll get to you."

"Is he waiting for me to kill Dumbledore for him?" Harry thought Rufus' theory to be a valid one, and wanted Remus' take.

“I think he’s still feeling you out. You’re an unknown Harry, even on our side. You saw that at the meeting today, some of them dismiss you out of hand, some are afraid of you, and the rest are in this room or in The Minister’s inner circle.”

“Well nothing I do is going to change that anytime soon, so they had better get used to it.”

“If only it were that simple.”

“I’ve found that very little to do with this war is simple Remus. Look even if Dumbledore isn’t so foolish as to try a snatch, I still don’t dare meet with him alone. I have secrets Remus, secrets that he would dearly love to know, and I don’t dare risk giving him even momentary access to my mind. Anyway, enough shop talk for awhile, let’s eat.”

And eat they did, as there was a mix of Mexican food, which Winky was getting more and more fond of making, and your traditional British food, which the Americans were slowly getting used to. Conversation was light and breezy, and only got remotely serious when the youngsters talked about their tutoring. Like Harry had told Tonks, nothing was discussed that he didn’t mind Dumbledore knowing. H didn’t even mind the old man knowing about The Pink, a bit of preventative medicine would do the trick with that.

After dinner, at Remus’ reluctant request, Harry showed a pensieve memory of the Lycan invasion of Great Lakes. This was the first such showing of pensieve things to the Brits, and only Remus’ morbid curiosity compelled him to ask to see this one. He wanted to see how American Lycans fought, and yes, he was curious about a full out battle between magicals and anyone using muggle weapons, a battle-type that was very rare. The DOM’s were on the edges of their seats as well, not that the other adults weren’t interested too.

They watched the replay in horrified silence, and Hermione of all people buried her face in Ron’s shoulder when Lycan Jeff Krupp made the change and went for Harry’s back, only to be stopped by Harry himself and the twins. Bill and Arthur were both highly impressed by the teamwork shown by the WWW three, and the way

that it truly seemed like a partnership, not just Harry saying 'go there and do this' to Fred and George, who had ideas of their own, and were capable of talking him out of his dodgier schemes. The Avada Kedavra moment resulted in a lot of people sucking in their breath, including Sophie and Claudia who had seen it before. Harry cut off the memory at the point that Dr. Parrish was about to start operating on him to repair the bullet wounds, feeling that enough had been shown to those who didn't know of the trunk system. Arthur turned to his sons, and asked was rubbing off on him.

"So you just happened to be visiting on the night that werewolves assault your partner's school?" The twins, having not seen the memory before, had immediately noticed several holes in that particular ruse, and hoped that a pair of innocent looks would defuse things.

"Yep."

"Uh huh."

"That must have put a damper on your Valentine's Day plans, eh?"

"We went over there afterward Dad, there is a time difference you know." Angelina and Alicia did their part and were nodding in agreement, they had heard the unvarnished truth a couple of hours after the events in question, and had been well warned and prepared.

"We'll let that story stand for now. Harry, what on earth possessed you to go after those werewolves like that?" Harry could take that question from Sophie, anyone else was pushing their luck.

"They were invading my home Arthur, did you expect me to cower under my bed?" Arthur's vivid imagination couldn't quite go that far.

"No one else seemed compelled to risk their lives like you did."

"That's only because you saw my memory Arthur, and no one else's. Ryan Chappelle and Art Hailey died while attacking the Lycan positions outside, they got out through the roof on their brooms, and

Jim Bouton survived by the hair on his chinny chin chin.. And these three would have left if I had let them.” He motioned to Reiko, Sophie, and Warrick. Bill sensed where this was going, and while he admired his father’s willingness to be Harry’s personal devil’s advocate, the law of diminishing returns was slowly coming into play here. He put his hand on Arthur’s arm and squeezed it a little harder than could be thought of as a loving gesture.

“Dad, enough.”

There were a lot of ways this could have gone, with Bill saying that to his father, but thankfully no violence ensued, though Molly would have a word with Bill later about it.

“I’m sorry Harry, I don’t mean to constantly prod you like I do. I just look at you as a son, and I just saw a memory of two of my sons being shot by a muggle gun, while shortly thereafter watching two of you kill the werewolf who shot the third. It’s all so very hard to take sometimes.”

“I know it is, but it was an isolated incident that is highly unlikely to happen again. We’ve gone to a lot of trouble to hide the four schools, and our wards are much better than they were.” That wasn’t saying much, at least that’s what Fred and George were dying to say. That would hardly have helped the situation, so for Harry’s benefit they kept quiet for now.

“He knew who you were.”

“I am famous you know Molly, all you would have to do is read any one of a half dozen magical publications to know where I would be during the school year. Sheen and Almeida knew who I was, and where I was, that’s it. They obviously didn’t factor me in, and wound up paying the penalty for it.” Ron then had a very ballsy question.

“Can we see your bullet scars?” Ron had only seen people shot on the television, and even then only in the last week. Molly was speechless, again, and thus couldn’t object. Harry didn’t see the harm, and pulled off his Milwaukee Bucks t-shirt. His body wasn’t the skin

and bones it used to be, but he still wouldn't be entering a Mr. Michigan competition anytime soon.

There were three small hole-shaped scars in front, and similar looking exit wounds in the back.

"Not as famous as my other scars, but at least I felt these." Hermione took notice of Harry's necklace, and walked up to get a closer look at it. No one ever saw it unless Harry took his shirt off in front of them, though he had shown all the other gang members when he had first gotten it.

"Harry, what are you wearing? Those aren't....."

"Yes they are, the medallion was made out of the spent bullets that got me, they're called slugs I'm told." She stared even closer.

"Please tell me that the red spots aren't what I think they are."

Harry's non-response told everyone all they needed to know.

"You are one for symbolism aren't you?"

"It's my new hobby. The guy charged extra to charm the blood to stay on too." That got a laugh from most everyone, especially the Brits, as the non-twins had never seen the necklace. One Brit didn't laugh, though she avoided a frown.

Hermione just shook her head, half in sadness and half in exasperation. Her Harry never would have done most of the things that the new model had, and she wasn't sure who to blame. Harry had been in error when he told Fred that she blamed the twins for most of it.....in her heart of hearts, she wanted to put most of it on Dumbledore and Ron. Dumbledore because he had denied Harry a family for all of those years, with the love and discipline that went with it, and Ron because if anyone should have been able to talk Harry out of this nonsense it should have been him, his surrogate brother and partner in crime. And yes, she realized that Ron didn't have the opportunity because of her. The rose colored glasses

Hermione used to wear when looking at Dumbledore had long fallen off, and viewing that memory had shattered them for good. She was the last of the DOM's to turn on Dumbledore, but in many ways now she was the most resolute.

Hermione had not told anyone this, but she had broached the idea of moving to Michigan to her parents back in December, just before the Harry visit to The Burrow that had upset everything. Mother and Father Granger were appalled at the idea of their daughter going abroad to school, even if they barely saw her as it was, she was still on the same island with them. Hermione still told them little about the Voldemort conflict, she had just used Harry's reasoning about Hogwarts's being a declining school. She assured them that she didn't have any romantic feelings for Harry, and she even believed that herself most of the time.

Still, they had told her that the decision should ultimately be hers, and she had been privately waffling until she saw Ron spinning in the air. That moment had been a watershed one for her, and reaffirmed that Ron was the one she loved. She could never quite put a finger on why, except that the common perception that she wanted a boyfriend exactly like her was totally mistaken, otherwise she would have made a beeline for Anthony Goldstein and started planning the wedding. She treasured Ron simply because he wasn't like her, and would be a loving and stable companion. He had a lot of unrealized potential that he was only now beginning to show signs of, and getting out of Harry's shadow really had been best for him now that she examined it from his point of view.

She looked over at Remus and had rarely seen her teacher look more disconcerted. The strain of being in this house again, with the veneer of hostility that Harry had shown him these last 12 months was beginning to take its toll on him. The Boy Who Lived himself was being nothing but friendly to the werewolf, and Hermione was ashamed to be thinking that this might be some kind of psychological ploy by him, to fatten Remus up for the kill. She was distracted by the pensieve sounding again, as Harry had been persuaded to put the Jefferson Quidditch game on. Ron and Ginny were fascinated by it, as Ginny turned to her twin brothers during a lull in the action.

“You two really do play rough don’t you?”

“We had to make an example of her.” Sally Jenkins he meant.

“She’s actually pretty good when she’s not being tormented like that, and she’s a pretty good Quodpot player too.” George just smirked nastily at his friend.

“Sure she is Jonas, you just keep recruiting her.” Jonas just smiled at him.

“Jealous my dear twin?”

“Of course not, I snagged my soul mate years ago, didn’t I Alicia?”

“Yes you did dear.”

“We’re not all so lucky though, are we?”

“I wasn’t much older than you are when I saw the light. There’s still time for you Jonas, don’t give up hope.”

“A homily for the ages, I’m so very grateful.”

A Quodpot game memory was promised for another night, as the party started to break up, Capture the Flag being delayed for a night or two as well. At least that was the plan, it would actually be a couple of weeks. Nora and Bruce were sufficiently impressed by Harry’s management of the house that they gave their full endorsement for their grandson/daughter to stick around for the duration. It helped that Dobby had done a quick change in the living situations upstairs, and the parental units never suspected a thing. Harry was yet again relieved that everyone appeared to be getting along. His deal with Murray to provide her with conflict stories might have to be altered. If he only knew.

Remus and Tonks were the last to leave, and were invited back for another Saturday dinner the following week, when ‘the talk’ would

presumably happen. Harry was still waffling on that though, he was thinking it might be best to do Remus immediately before Dumbledore, for momentum purposes. As he and Sophie were getting ready for bed, she felt free to inquire.

“You were pretty easy on Remus tonight, I thought you were going to go for the talk with him?”

“I was all set to until I saw him in the Death Room. Sophie, he just looked so shattered, I couldn’t bring myself to knock him down any further.”

“Maybe you could modify the talk to just be about your parents, and skip the whole ‘why the bloody hell didn’t you check on me with the Dursleys’ part of it.” Harry started chuckling.

“You know, listening to the words ‘bloody hell’ come out of your mouth is very disconcerting Sophie.”

“You know you love it.” The lights out now, they were still sitting up in bed while they talked this out.

“I never said I didn’t. Anyway, your idea would be a great one except for one tiny detail.”

“Which is?”

“I actually do need to know why he didn’t check up on me, for sure I can’t rely on the old man to tell me the truth about it, and he’ll never agree to Veritaserum unless I do it too. I’ll question Remus a lot more gently than I would have before today, but I need to know.”

“I see what you mean, I would like to know myself, a lot of went on there just doesn’t pass the smell test.”

“I really hope he’s going to say more than ‘but Harry, Dumbledore promised me it was for the best’. If that’s what he comes up with after all this time, then you can be assured that violence will ensue.”

Sophie was not uncomfortable with that idea, but altered the subject to something more gossipy.

“You think he and Tonks are an item? I didn’t see them holding hands or anything, but she had at least one eye peeled on him the entire time.” Harry had noticed the same thing.

“Well she had plenty of chances to deny it, and she declined every one of them.”

“It’s kind of sweet actually, whatever age difference they might have. So what are you plotting?” He sighed and huddled closer to her, thinking of how to answer that.

“I’m not plotting anything right now, just pondering. I think this past week with Ron and Hermione has made me understand Remus a little better.”

“You’re seeing parallels between you three and the Marauders?” Very sharp this woman was.

“I am, and the more I think about it the more it bothers me. Peter Pettigrew was made the secret keeper because they were trying to fake out Voldemort, and maybe Dumbledore. The obvious secret keeper was Sirius, too obvious. So why didn’t they choose Remus instead? As a werewolf he would be harder to torture, and I read that it is harder to break into their minds as well.”

“They suspected him of being the traitor didn’t they?” Over the course of the last nine months Sophie had heard all of Harry’s stories and experienced most of them visually through the pensieve.....enough so that some of the details were jumbled a little in her mind. If anyone was to write the Harry Potter series, it would be her.

“That’s what he told me back in third year, the little he would ever tell me about his involvement in that whole fiasco. I have to wonder if that contributed a little to his non-involvement with me for all those

years, some residual bitterness toward Mum and Dad for suspecting him like that.”

“So Ron and Hermione are feeling Remus-like about your decision to leave and not tell them?”

“I think they are, yeah. I know it’s not on the same level, and they only suspect of how much Neville and Luna knew……but……I don’t know Sophie, I don’t know what to do here.” Sophie knew that her job here was to buck him up, and she dug into said job with gusto.

“Harry, you did the best you could with the information you had at the time. You effected an escape from a house under surveillance, and were in Michigan before any of your enemies or dubious allies even knew you had thought about leaving the country. I didn’t appreciate it as much at the time, what with falling in love with you and all, but now that I’ve gotten a firsthand look at the situation you left, I’m astonished by how easily you did it.” Harry smiled in the dark and pulled her closer. Big Bad Harry James was threatening to take things over, but he ignored it for the time being.

“I should have told them before I got on the plane. I could have called Hermione from the airport, her phone number couldn’t have been that hard to find out. Even if she warned Dumbledore, he couldn’t have stopped me in time.” Sophie immediately thought of two gaping holes in that theory.

“Harry, you’re reaching here, and while it’s noble and out of guilt, that does not make you right. First, Dumbledore could have easily found your flight plan and stopped you at O’Hare during your layover. In fact it would have been easier there, since you were relaxed a little from making your escape, yet still a little on edge from your first plane ride. Second, I doubt Hermione would have been mollified by you calling her on the phone and saying ‘goodbye Hermione, I’m suddenly off to America’.” He still didn’t sound convinced after hearing that though.

“Better than having Bill tell her and Ron in front of a crowd of people.”

“Where is this coming from Harry? Did seeing Remus in the Death Room bring out that much guilt in you?” She left out that Harry never seemed to have a lot of latent guilt before.

“I guess it did, I wasn’t thinking these things earlier in the week, even after I talked those couple of times with her. I just worry about history repeating itself.”

“They would never turn on you like that.”

“Why wouldn’t they? Didn’t I turn on them first? With just the slightest suspicions, and even then only of Hermione.” Sophie was starting to get a little worried here.

“You didn’t turn on them Harry, events forced you to do what you did. Dumbledore would have done anything to keep you from leaving, and one of them might have let it slip without thinking. Besides, even if they thought they were in private, who knows how many Listening Charms he had planted, and where. You were just being careful, nothing more nothing less.”

“Sophie, I’m not having second thoughts about the move itself, just about the mess I left behind because of the way I did it.”

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

“Sure you weren’t.”

“Prove it.” That lifted Harry out of his funk for the time being, and he started laughing evilly.

“Hmmm, Legilimency the home game. This should be fun, where’s my wand?”

“Don’t even try it Mister, you can always go sleep on the couch.” She was laughing when she said it, and Harry pounced, ending that line of the conversation for the time being.

Harry would think about this subject off and on for days afterward, but wouldn't wind up saying anything to Ron or Hermione. He would make a point of including them in things he did with Sophie, and the four of them got more and more comfortable with each other. This would last a grand total of two days.

Monday, July 7, 1997

Dinner Time

The Hollow

Sunday had been all about London calling, as the Americans were given the grand tour, doing all the tourist stops. Harry and Neville had only been London familiar during Harry's hiding out, nor were the Weasleys that familiar with it, so Hermione and Luna played tour guides for the late morning and all afternoon. All of them were there for this, and it was quite a site, the lot of them all coming down the street in one mass. There was one odd occurrence, as Dobby and Winky, trailing along behind in stealth mode, spotted someone else following them as well. The stalker took pains to avoid being spotted, but Winky managed a picture of him with her ever present camera. She showed the photo to Harry that night, but he didn't recognize him, the man was in his mid 40's and was totally nondescript looking. He would show the photo to Rufus the next night, as he was due for dinner, to see if hopefully he was Ministry personnel on bodyguard duty.

Cue the dinner:

Rufus Scrimgeour, much to his private amusement, was seated in Harry's living room, bottle of Coke in one hand, piece of pizza in the other, surrounded by the E-gang, none of whom was even 20 years old as of yet. It was a scene much like in MTV's Choose or Lose campaigns where Bill Clinton would answer questions from high school and college students.....the only caveats being: What was said in The Hollow, stayed in The Hollow.....and for every question he answered, he had the right to ask a question back to the questioner, though he didn't do that every time. So what occurred was a free-

wheeling Q&A that few high school students ever got to have with their country's leader. Some highlights:

“Did I ever think of punching Fudge? All the bloody time, but it's a measure of my self control that I managed not to do it. I did trip him a couple of times, but I made it look like an accident.”

“Magically trip him or physically?”

“Both Warrick, he never seemed to cotton on to the fact that he always fell down on my birthday. How that man got to be Minister I'll never understand, I certainly never voted for him.”

“Dumbledore's greatest strength, as Harry here will bear witness to, is that he makes it appear like he cares more than anything about you and what you're talking with him about. He has the grandfatherly pathos about him, even though he's not a grandfather, and it lulls you to sleep. Plus that man can talk you to death. When I was Head Boy I lost every argument I had with him because he simply wouldn't let it go, and I would have to concede so I could get back to my studying, or I'd have been there all night.” He asked Neville the next question:

“Why did you never tell your friends that you were cousins with the Head Auror/Minister? Harry here nearly fell out of his chair when I told him back in February.” Neville looked a bit embarrassed, though it's not like the question had been framed as ‘are you bloody ashamed of me or something?’.

“I don't know, I just didn't want to be like Draco Malfoy, bragging about his father, or running to him whenever he got into trouble. I guess I kind of liked the view from the high road.” Rufus smiled at that, but on the inside he was thinking that it was such a waste that this young man was forced to grow up with Frank and Alice like they were. In a lot of ways Harry had it easier than Neville in this regard, or so The Minister thought at the time. He made a quiet resolution to become more involved in Neville's life. Next up:

“What to do about Hogwarts? Well the Defense jinx is broken for next year at least, unless Lupin falls down a flight of stairs in the next

seven weeks. Potions seems to have been stabilized, even if young Shepherd is hell bent on driving McGonagall crazy.....not a bad goal if you think about it, she is wound rather tightly to begin with. He's an amusing young man, quite the contrast to the old man's former pet. No, the only subjects that really need attention now are History of Magic and Divination, and those classes are on the bottom of the importance scale anyway, and not really worth the effort to correct. Oh Care of Magical Creatures is now toothless, pun intended, but its hard to get anyone else to do it, and I suppose we should be grateful that Hagrid isn't harming any other students." Indeed the events of the last two years had rather cured Hagrid's desire to teach, and he had quietly gone to Dumbledore asking to be relieved of those duties so he could concentrate on being Gamekeeper and his Order duties. For reasons known only to himself, Dumbledore had persuaded the half-giant to remain in place for another year, then they would revisit the topic. Hagrid was not a member of the League, and he and Harry had not run into each other as yet this summer. Bill had invited him to the wedding, so it would be interesting to see if the large man would avoid Harry by not going.

"What about our brother Charlie? He might be persuaded." The Minister then shared a bit of information with them that Charlie had neglected to.

"Oh he was offered the job before Hagrid, when Kettlebaum retired to nurse his stumps. It was hard for the Hogwarts Board of Directors to take Hagrid seriously.....okay it still is, but they wouldn't sign off on Hagrid until Dumbledore had beat the bushes a little bit more. Dumbledore had sole hiring authority at the time, but there were some fights that even he wasn't willing to hassle with. Your brother declined immediately, saying that his dragon work was too close to his heart to abandon it quite yet." Charlie had not wanted to leave his beloved dragons, even to teach his youngest siblings, but had been afraid to tell them this for fear of hurting their feelings. Rufus had not known this, so the one Weasley Seeker would be getting an earful the following week at the Bill/Fleur wedding at The Burrow.

"Have you checked up on Umbridge at Azkaban? How is she doing?"

“Ron, your favorite former Inquisitor is adjusting very nicely to Azkaban.....nicely for us, not for her. According to the reports I’m getting she screams the name Fudge a lot. If only we knew where Fudge was.” That was said without a trace of facetiousness, as Rufus was unsure of who Harry had told the real truth to. That group had been limited to Sophie, Fred, George, and Drew.....Drew because he had actually met Fudge before, through his mother a few years previous. Harry would tell Rufus that later on in private.

“How long will she last?”

“The Dementors are not big fans of her, or so I hear, so expect a death notice sometime in the next year or two. They don’t like being ordered to do hits on kids like they’re some kind of assassins. Turnkeys they don’t mind being, at least for now. The dichotomy slays me, but I’m not complaining.”

“What House were you? What House was Dumbledore?”

“I was a Gryffindor myself, class of 1965. I was a year ahead of the Weasley parents, but I was too old to have anything to do with such youngsters.....just kidding. Dumbledore was a Hufflepuff, though the year is somewhat in question. He’s at least a hundred years old, probably a lot more. We tend to live longer you know. I agree that the old man has attributes of all the Houses in him, that’s one place that Harry reminds me of him.....now don’t take a swing at me Harry, just think about it.” Harry just looked innocent as he replied.

“Why I had no earthly intention of taking a swing at The Minister of Magic.”

“ You’ll make a fine politician one day Harry. No seriously: Dumbledore is loyal, a Hufflepuff trait. That he’s loyal to a fault sometimes is his problem, but he’s too old to change his ways and I have no interest in getting him to try. He’s brave like a Gryffindor, even Voldemort will admit that much, and so can I. He’s smart beyond measure, like a Ravenclaw, and I don’t need to tell you about his Slytherin side. Harry is similar in the overall, if not the details.”

“You’ve been doing your homework Minister.”

“I have my moments, yes.”

The discussion then moved to stories of the first Voldemort war, and how most of the main Death Eaters had either escaped capture and fled, or simply used the ‘But I was under Imperious’ defense.

“The only sure way to test of that kind of thing is Veritaserum, and Fudge, Bagnold and McLaws would never agree to it. I think McLaws was just too worried about how deep it went, while Fudge was on the Malfoy payroll and didn’t want to risk any exposure there, or so we assume. Who knows what Bagnold thought, though I do owe her for appointing me Head Auror, you’ll rarely hear me directly say an ill word toward her because of that.” Millicent Bagnold had been Minister right before Fudge, before abruptly declining to run for re-election, for reasons still undetermined. Even Fudge, while under Veritaserum before his memory wipe, had not known why, and Sarah Westbrook had been instructed to ask. Bagnold now lived in Ireland and was an occasional lecturer at The Michael Collins School, whose Headmaster was her longtime companion. Lafayette McLaws had been in office during the Godric’s Hollow incident, though he had allowed Dumbledore to clean up the mess. He had resigned due to ‘health reasons’ that even he had trouble saying with a straight face. McLaws was currently the History of Magic teacher at The Maple Leaf School of Magic in Canada, and rarely made a point of bringing up his political career in front of his students or his fellow faculty members, many of whom were unaware of it.

“Could Fudge have been gotten around? His non-action must have been very frustrating.”

“Fudge could only have been gotten around with supreme effort, and a little luck. You see kids, the man was never out and out pro-Dark, he was pro-Do Nothing. It just so happened that doing nothing happened to be to the benefit of Malfoy and his minions, rather than Dumbledore and his sycophants. So when you were in it close like that, it was rather hard to tell about his sympathies, he just seemed

lazy and complacent, not dangerous. Was it frustrating to work under? Absolutely, since Amelia toed the official line, saying that rules are rules, and that The Minister deserved the benefit of the doubt. It sounds hypocritical of me to complain now, since I'm benefiting by that policy, but it did rather chafe at the time."

Rufus then told some of his old war stories from the first Voldemort conflict, and gave an abbreviated version of how he, Travis Biller, and Sarah Westbrook had become so close over the years.....they had been a crew for six years before Bagnold had kicked Rufus upstairs, with Rob Graham taking his place. All in all it was an interesting three hour seminar on how The Ministry of Magic currently worked, and how it had worked in the past, and perhaps some of its future possibilities. It was not part of the official tutoring program, Rufus having no formal role in it, but he saw the opportunity to bond with the youngsters, many of whom would play significant roles in his country's future, be it in business: Fred, George, Lee and Harry; Academia: Neville and Hermione; Athletics: Harry again, and Angelina; Media: Luna and Alicia; and inside the Ministry itself: likely Ron and Ginny. The Americans were the wild card, with Rufus amazed that Harry was in the bottom half of his gang grades-wise, though Harry and Drew were likely the only future Aurors.....and The Minister firmly believed that Harry would join someone's Auror Command once he was done playing Quidditch, the lad liked action too much to stay on the sidelines when the next Voldemort came around, as one inevitably would.

Plus, and this couldn't be discounted: Rufus had no children of his own, and he rather liked the notion of playing mentor, particularly to such a large and diverse group. He was truly in love with his work, and a few early relationships had taught him that his desire to put in 90 hours a week at the office wasn't too conducive to family life.

He got up to leave, and Harry walked him to the front door.

"Minister, thank you very much for coming over, I hope you know that you're always welcome in whatever home I happened to be living in." Rufus was genuinely moved by that last sentiment, and smiled. He would make a point of buying a pint of something strong for Travis,

as his protégé was the one who had pressed hard for this alliance with Harry.

“Thank you Harry, I had a great time with you and your friends. I’m sure we’ll see each other around campus the rest of the month, and at Bill’s wedding of course.”

“A wild affair to be sure, I’m going to do the Dumbledore meeting right afterwards. Please make some time available for that if you can, I’d like you to kibitz.” Rufus and Travis already had a 10 galleon bet on whether or not Harry would be sending Dumbledore on the fast track to St. Mungo’s at that meeting, with Biller taking the line that Dumbledore would do everything he could to forestall a battle, short of actually kowtowing to the lad. Rufus maintained that the old man just wouldn’t be able to help himself, and would patronize Harry to the point that the young man would flip and start the curses flying.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“You mind if I ask you a private question?”

“Haven’t I been answering questions all night long Harry?” Heh heh.

“Well this one is not for public consumption, even my friends. Feel free not to answer if you don’t want to, but.....who is your inside person at Hogwarts?” Rufus’ crafty smile made another appearance as he chewed on that one.

“What makes you think I have one?”

“How else would you know that Shepherd is trying to drive McGonagall crazy?”

“You picked that up did you? Well Harry, my inside person is Shepherd himself, his father was a roommate with Bruce Lovegood and myself, the only Gryffindor in his extended family, the rest are all Slytherin. I am godfather to two people in our little world, and Maya Biller is far and away the youngest.” It fell into place for Harry, and his own crafty smile was evident.

“Oh my.”

“He wasn’t a plant mind you, as I was not Minister at the time, just a very fortuitous pick by our friend. Fortuitous for me that is, not our friend.”

“We can’t be having that now can we?”

“No we cannot Harry, no we cannot. Anyhow, was there anything else you wanted to ask?” There was a ‘ping’ in the lad’s mind.

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Dobby!”

“Yes Harry?”

“Please get that photograph that Winky took yesterday if you could.”

“Right away Harry.”

He came back in a few seconds with the photograph. Harry handed it to Rufus.

“Is this one of your guys? He was following us yesterday in muggle London. He didn’t plant any Charms or the like, and made no physical contact. But Dobby and Winky say that he was with us for most of the day.” Rufus studied the picture, but was shaking his head the whole time.

“No Harry, he’s not one of ours, and doesn’t look like any of the Death Eaters we know about. You mind if I take this?”

“Sure, I had the copy made for you.”

“Good, I’ll get this to Travis and have him look into it. Two immediate theories come to mind.”

Harry didn’t quite interrupt him, but the theories were easy to divine.

“He’s either a Death Eater or an Order member.” The Minister was nodding.

“I would lean more to Death Eater myself, Dumbledore knows that you’ll burn him down if he misbehaves.”

“ And right he would be, I’ve all but posted it on the Hogwarts’ bulletin boards. Whatever happens will be interesting.”

“All too true. Goodnight Harry, thank you again for the pizza and conversation.”

“Goodnight Minister.” Rufus walked out and took the portkey ride back to his house near Notting Hill. Harry walked back into the main room to find battle lines nearly being drawn.

The twins and Ron and Hermione were standing toe to toe, though no wands had been drawn just yet. Harry had a bad feeling about this immediately.

“What the hell is going on? You know I leave for five minutes.....” Hermione looked at him with barely concealed hostility, which privately amused him for some strange reason.

“Your best mates just challenged Ron and I to a duel.” Harry surprised them all by starting to laugh, which caused others to start smiling as well.....not that it defused much tension.

“You didn’t.” Fred and George had been hoping for this kind of reaction from him, and Ron seemed genuinely surprised by Harry’s surprise.....which was also genuine, as the twins had intended.

“We most certainly did partner. We know they’re no match for you, even by yourself, but I think the rest of us could do with a look at what they’re made of.” Hermione took a step forward toward the twins, confident that Harry wouldn’t let them attack her.

“You’ve been waiting for this moment haven’t you? It’s not enough that you ridicule Ron and me every chance you get, now you have to prove yourselves somehow by fighting against us? You’ve killed Death Eaters and werewolves to be sure, but you need the satisfaction here don’t you?” George didn’t back down a millimeter, but kept his voice light and amused.

“Why Hermione, such anger and resentment. It’s almost like you’re afraid.” The look on her face was just priceless.

“Of the likes of you? Hardly. I just know it wouldn’t be a two on two fight. The moment you started losing.....” And dangerous ground was officially trodden on by a legitimately worried Hermione. Harry stepped in the middle of the two, Ron so far had not said a word.

“Hey now, let’s not go overboard here. We can all do without this hostility. All those who knew about this challenge before five minutes ago, raise your hands.” The twins, along with Angelina and Alicia, raised their hands.....no one else did. Harry was quietly relieved that the ‘conspiracy’ went no further than the twins and their ladies, and turned to Hermione.

“All right then, Hermione are you satisfied that this isn’t a setup?”

“No I’m not, though I believe you when you say you didn’t know. This has got to stop Harry, this suspicion and mistrust that Ron and I have to labor under, just because we happen to be near Dumbledore. Ginny’s near Dumbledore too, she’s a Prefect, but you trust her!” In point of fact Harry trusted Ginny just a wee bit more than Hermione and Ron, but just a wee bit, though Dumbledore was again the reason. Ginny beat him to the punch though.

“Hey now, leave me out of this please.” Hermione rounded on her.

“Of course, you’ll choose the fun brothers over the one who has looked out for you for five years at Hogwarts.” The younger woman rolled her eyes.

“Only you could go there from what I said Hermione. You’re just bitter because you’re not in control anymore, you can only lead Ron, and not Ron and Harry.”

“I do not need to control anyone Ginny and you know it.”

“I know nothing of the kind, Ron is the most whipped boy in the history of Hogwarts!” Ron still wasn’t saying a word, nor did anyone else want to dip their toes in such dangerous waters, but Ron especially saw no benefit to get into this..

“Ron can do what he likes, when he likes, and no one knows that more clearly than he does.” Even Hermione didn’t truly believe that, and Harry now felt the time was right to end this.

“Enough. For the record, there will be no dueling in this house by anyone.....at least not for something so trivial as insults or turf establishing. Hermione, everyone knows that Ron is the subordinate in your relationship, but as long as he can handle it, that’s all that matters as far as I’m concerned. And just for the record, the two of them tease and mock me more than the two of you combined, you just don’t see it on a daily basis. Ginny, no one is asking you to choose between the twins and Ron, or any other combination. Twins, I repeat, no duels. Ron, you have nothing to prove in battle, you’ve fought Death Eaters twice and acquitted yourself nobly both times. Now we are all going to get along for the rest of the month, or you will answer to me, and Merlin knows that no two of you can take me in combat, unless one of you is Drew and you have a ton of luck on your side. Am I in any way unclear!” No one seemed to indicate that he was unclear, and the twins even looked a bit chastened.

“Good, now teasing is allowed, encouraged even.....but the next person who baits someone? Well I’m going to have Dobby short-sheet your bed, with you in it!” Dobby happened to be standing near Harry, the argument had brought him into the room out of curiosity, and he could be seen vigorously nodding his head in total agreement.....in spite of the fact that he didn’t know what short-sheeting a bed entailed. The Americans were trying hard not to say

anything, though all six of them had some definite opinions, and they had all looked at Drew when Harry had mentioned him.

Harry motioned for Fred and George to follow him into the kitchen, as everyone dispersed to their usual evening routines.....which meant movies. Once inside the kitchen:

“What the hell were you two thinking?”

“Oh for crying out loud Harry, it was just a bit of fun.” Oh brother, thought Harry, figuratively and literally.

“On what planet can you guys not whip those two inside of a minute? You know that, I know that, everyone in there knows that, except maybe Hermione. All you would be doing is fracturing things even more, because you know that your parents would have taken Ron’s side once you put him in the hospital.” They hadn’t thought of that.

“We wouldn’t have put that git in St. Mungo’s.”

“Uh huh, and when his not-so hidden frustrations boiled over and he tried something rash? You really wouldn’t have responded in kind?”

“All right, all right, point taken. I still maintain that Hermione needs a comeuppance of some sort.” Harry checked to make sure that they were indeed alone in the room, except for Winky, who had wanted no part of the arguments.

“I’m not unsympathetic to that idea, but it can’t be the two of you, or me for that matter.” They saw where this was leading.

“Drew or Sophie?”

“Sophie is amenable to that particular task, or so she’s told me. Drew would slaughter Hermione in a heartbeat, there’s nothing she can do that he can’t do better and faster. Sophie would appear, on the surface anyway, to be a more equal match.”

“Without telling Miss Can’t Be Wrong that you’ve been tutoring Sophie on the side.”

“Enough with the name calling, that doesn’t help. Look, I’m not trying to be a spoilsport here, but we need to keep the lid on for just a little while longer. Once school starts, you two will never see that pair anyway, so it won’t matter.”

“How bout the way little Ron didn’t say a word?” Harry had noticed that as well, and it bothered him a little.

“Do you think he would have dueled you guys?”

“We do, it would have hurt his pride to look like a coward, even if just in front of us.”

“Well leave him alone please, he’s been pretty cool for the last week and I don’t want to screw that up.”

“Yes boss.”

“You got it Lord Potter.”

They were grinning as they said that, and Harry had been perfectly honest when he said that they mocked him more than anyone. Before the three left the room, they quietly whispered to him.

“How are you going to maneuver Hermione into dueling with Sophie?” Harry grinned at them.

“Travis is already on board with the plan. It will be a fair duel, that my lady will win hands down.”

“Friends in high places, very nice.” They went back into the living room, and Harry took a deep breath and motioned for Ron and Hermione to come with him. Once back in the kitchen.

“Okay then, they’re going to lay off you two, at my urging, I doubt they would be doing it otherwise. I’m going to ask the same of you, not to antagonize them if at all possible.” Hermione looked to be getting her non-existent dander up, when Ron put a hand on her arm.

“Leave it alone Hermione, the twins are just being themselves, no more and no less.”

“It’s not right, you’re their brother.” Ron shrugged.

“They treat me pretty well on the whole you know, you don’t have any brothers Hermione, so it’s harder for you to understand. I have a nice paying summer job because of them, and they are pretty funny most of the time. Sure they like Ginny better, but she’s the only girl in the house, and everyone does dote on her. Hell, I prefer her to the twins too.....don’t tell her I said that Harry.” ‘don’t tell so and so I said that’ was a phrase Harry heard quite a bit from various Weasleys. He didn’t mind though, he rather welcomed the chance to play peacemaker for once in his new life.

“I won’t Ron, don’t worry.”

“Who do you think would have won that duel if it had come off?” Ron did the asking, but Harry’s answer was given while looking straight at Hermione.

“They would have, and we all know it. Look, I’m not denigrating your fighting abilities, and I meant what I said about you Ron.....but Fred and George have a confidence in battle that the two of you, and Luna, Neville, Ginny, and my American friends just don’t have right now. It’s something that requires experience to get, and the Department of Mysteries battle just wasn’t enough, we were all just flailing about really. Fred and George walk into a fight and know what has to be done. I’m not saying you won’t get that aura, but you don’t have it yet.....and I hope you never will. If you guys don’t ever have to raise your wands in anger again that would suit me just fine.” Ron the Reasonable nodded his head and struck again.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I like your Yanks though Harry, I have to admit. Warrick needles me some, but I give it back just as good and he just smiles and laughs.” One of Harry’s gray hairs, and he did have a few, turned back to black at hearing that.

“He’s a fun guy, I was hoping you two might bond a little. So when are you and Drew going to have your big chess game?”

“We played a couple of games the other night, he barely got me in the first and I got him pretty decisively in the second. Look, I can tell you two need to talk, so I’m going to grab another Dr. Pepper and get back to the movie. Wherever you found that stuff Harry.....it sure beats pumpkin juice. However bad it is for my teeth Hermione.” The daughter of dentists Hermione was, and that brought out her first smile in quite a while. He kissed her on the forehead, grabbed his drink, and left.

“You really need to calm down about slights Hermione, imagined, real, or otherwise.” She shocked him to his bones by agreeing with him.

“I know, and I’m sorry. I just don’t like Fred and George and how they treat certain people is all.”

“They like the needle, I’m with you there.” The twins had always treated Hermione much as they did now, so Harry knew that his friend wasn’t saying everything that she could have here.

“Just tell me one thing Harry.”

“What’s that?”

“Look me straight in the eye and tell me that your mistrust of Ron and me is solely because of Dumbledore.” He did as asked, although there were shades of gray in what he really thought.

“My lack of trust in you and Ron is solely because your proximity to Dumbledore. He broke into your mind once before didn’t he? Didn’t you write to me that you didn’t realize it until later?” Her last defenses sundered by this most gentle of assaults, and she surrendered.

“All right then, and I know I can’t keep him out now either.”

“Less than a year Hermione, that’s all. Besides, I don’t think I’ll be doing much once I get back to Michigan. Just school, Quidditch, and Sophie.” If only it were that simple, he thought ruefully.

“And your alliance with our Minister.”

“And that too, so I’ll be back here once a month on the average. And we’ll do something for Christmas again, here or at The Burrow.”

“Without Ron being twirled I hope?” Harry was mortally sick of this being brought up.

“Without him tackling his brother I hope?” She had the grace to look a little abashed.

“He knows not to do that again, and he knew it without me telling him thank you.” Harry chuckled.

“You’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever met Hermione, but the fact that you’re so oblivious to the dynamics of your own relationship just slays me.” Hermione was in no way oblivious to that, but a combination of not wanting to admit it and concern for Ron’s ego always made her act otherwise.

“Are you saying that you don’t rule your group?”

“Yes I’m saying that. I oversee the Departments of Pranking and Out of Town Trips, and that’s it. You just happen to see me when my fiefs are out front.”

“Uh huh.”

“Ask any one of them Hermione, they’ll tell you the same thing.”

“They’ll cover for you I’m sure. I see the way they all look to you.”

“Because they’re on my turf Hermione, in theory, since I hadn’t been here for years. Plus I’m the one who knows Rufus and Travis, though they’d all met Travis. Trust me when I tell you this Hermione, when we’re all in Indianapolis or Chicago, I’m the one who follows them, not the other way round.” She then brought the subject around to something the DOM’s had all been wondering privately about.

“What about you and Sophie? Am I going to be getting a wedding invitation sometime next spring?”

“I’m 16 years old Hermione.”

“Mrs. Weasley was 18 when she got married, so was Mr. Weasley.” Unlike Harry and the Americans, she still refused to use their first names.

“They were sweethearts for years Hermione, I’ve still not been with Sophie for a year. I love her very much, and I’m sure we’ll get married eventually.....but next summer is a reach. Besides, we’ll have the twins’ wedding to go to, that’s enough for one season.” Hermione shuddered at the spectacle of a WWW wedding. Harry and Sophie had actually discussed marriage a few times, and while they agreed that the love was there, they wanted the maturity to be there as well. Harry’s current plan was to hold the ceremony on December 31, 1999, and have the ‘I do’ part of it right as the ball dropped on the new century. As Hermione had said, he was really into symbolism now.

“Speaking of weddings, what about you and Ron? You’ve been with him three, very long, weeks longer than Sophie and I have been a couple.” She couldn’t dodge the question after asking it herself, and to her credit gave an honest answer.

“I don’t know, I’m guessing that he’ll ask at Christmas.”

“And you’ll say.....”

“Yes of course, I love Ron more than anything, I know we’ll have a wonderful life together.” Harry then surprised her by giving her a brief hug.

“I know you will too Hermione, I’ll be the one in the crowd cheering the loudest for you.”

“You’ll be right up there next to Ron, have no fear of that Harry.” Harry broke off the hug and began to walk away, grabbing his own 20 oz. Dr. Pepper as he did.

“That would be great if it happens.” He rejoined the others in the living room, and after snagging a Snapple for herself she joined him.....she and twins didn’t disagree on everything. She had meant to quiz Harry more about his Rufus alliance, but he always seemed to cut off the conversations, in a nice way, before she could get around to it.

Over the next week things settled in very well, with no new eruptions of tension. Hermione still would not go anywhere near WWW, and made a point of not being alone if the twins were near, but she held her tongue. The twins themselves would wink at her every chance they got, but otherwise they held off. The business was booming now, as everyone but Hermione and Alicia, who had a year round job at The Daily Prophet remember, pitched in. It turned out that Luna and Sophie had real talents for doing the Talking Tattoos, and were turning them out by the barrel. Warrick and Drew were swamp experts by now, with everyone picking a specialty and concentrating on it. Sophie and Claudia were loving all the money they were making, their Flackter Alley trips would be that much better come Fall, and the twins had assured all the Americans that if they wanted to put in a few hours a week during the school year, they were more than welcome. The stockpiles were building up, and the twins were able to concentrate on inventing some new pranks when they weren’t with the tutoring.

One of their newest inventions was a Ventriloquist Sponge. The sponge, and it really was a small muggle sponge loaded with charms, worked up to five meters away from the person who activated it. It was pretty intricate stuff, but it worked perfectly and Neville and Ginny in particular were already dreaming about how they would torment Filch with it. The two of them, with Luna and Dean, were talking about using the original Map more and more when they got back to Hogwarts, as it had largely gone to waste the previous year, what with Ron's antics and all. Harry saw the possibilities as well, the first day of school was going to be an interesting time. Something like this would be perfect for Marty and Keisha, Warrick's young cousins who were due to start at Great Lakes in a few weeks.....once the formality of getting their letters was dealt with of course.

Another invention was called Outer Monologue Gum, whereby the chewer of the gum had what he or she said float in a bubble above them. Fred had gotten the idea from perusing Sophie's Foxtrot comic strip book collection, and combining it with some of the charms used to make Quick Quotes Quills. It worked pretty well, and even adapted to how quickly the chewer was talking. On the sly they had sent some to Professor Ziegler at Great Lakes, the teacher of theirs' who talked the most in class, and he had sent back a positive report, along with a request for some more product once they got it up and running.

The tutoring was going swimmingly as far as they were all concerned. All but Harry, Neville, Luna, and Ginny had passed their Apparition tests, and they could be seen popping in and out of The Burrow when they went to dinner there on Wednesday. The youngest four, if you will, were all scheduled to take their tests on the 31st, the day of the big party at The Hollow and Harry and his Americans' last day in Britain. Only Neville was having problems with it, but he was bound and determined to be ready for the test on schedule.

Harry, the only one who was being tutored every day, found himself working more and more with Lucy Deakins and Rob Graham. The latter was the hand to hand specialist, and the former was the Auror in charge of Research in the DMLE. He learned quite a bit about how the various Death Eaters conducted themselves in battle, and in public to boot. Lucy Deakins, a nice lady in her mid-40's, was one of the Aurors who had captured the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Jr.

Moody may have had a chunk taken out of his nose during that fight, but she had been injured in the leg so severely that her limp had rendered her unfit for most Auror duties. So she went into Research, and Harry soaked up everything she could tell him. This was the part of academia that Harry most enjoyed, and however many classes he would take at muggle university, he knew he would major in history.

Tuesday, July 15, 1997

Early Evening

The Hollow

It was grade day for our American based players, and a lot of nerves were on edge during WWW-time and tutoring. Fred and George would be getting their NEWT results, and were surprised enough to find that they were half looking forward to them and half dreading them. It seems that they were more invested in the whole process than they had ever anticipated. The Juniors would all be finding out their class ranks, and what their equivalent GPA's would be, muggle-wise. The big meeting to decide on colleges would be later that night, with the Brits cordially invited to kibitz, though only Hermione would have more than a vague idea of what they were talking about most of the time. This night was also to be Jonas' swan song, as he was scheduled to do the portkey run starting at 1:00 am, so he could get to upstate New York and his Quodpot camp, which was to start the next day.

Grades for the upper three years, Transition, Junior, and Senior were expedited at Great Lakes and the American Wizard Educational System in general. This was so that the Transitions could get their OWL results right away, to have more time to determine their class schedules; Juniors could have a better idea of where to apply to muggle universities.....and Seniors so that they could have closure. Pretty much all government jobs in magical America required a muggle university degree of some sort, they wanted their young people to have a better idea of life outside of their tightly enclosed magical fraternity. Only the Auror Academy was a notable exception, though they offered programs for their graduates to go to college part-time.....call it the magical GI Bill. Mitchell Baylor had gone to

Marquette University on such a program, though it appeared as though Drew would be doing the opposite, which was allowed as well.

Dobby had been instructed to be in Murray's office at 10:00 am to get the envelopes, and he was there with bells on. Karl and Lisa Aylesworth did not have a Anthony Hook made trunk yet, that was on Harry's agenda for the month, so Dobby did a transatlantic series of hops, much like the portkey runs that the various Weasleys were always making.....he just didn't need the portkey, and his rest stops were usually about five minutes instead of an hour. Dobby had gotten rather spoiled by the trunk system, but every once in a while didn't matter too much. He returned at 5:30 pm to the shop, and soon everyone was at the Hollow, waiting for the news, including Molly, Arthur, and Bill. The three elder Weasleys came last, Harry had slipped Bill a few portkeys so that he could come over whenever he wanted, and they got there to find a heated argument between Warrick, Jonas, and the twins over whose scores were to be read first.

"Oh c'mon, its my last night here, we should get to know first."

"Oh please, Mister I'm going to be a millionaire this time next year, your grades hardly matter. We worked really hard on our NEWT studying, we should go first."

"Ten weeks we were stuck back in school!" Warrick took over the argument.

"Oh shut up you babies, you got to play Quidditch again didn't you? Another Quidditch Cup for your trophy case."

That shut them up for a second, then George got his second wind.

"Small consolation I'm telling you, and one of those games was a gimme anyway." The Shawnee massacre.

"I was there you know."

"We even let you continue to play our positions, out of the goodness of our hearts."

“I tried playing Chaser, I kept crushing the Quaffle in my bare hands.”

George and Fred pondered the meaning of that last sentence for a few seconds, and then went for the home run, while Harry was shaking with silent laughter.

“Mum, tell these two that we should go first.”

Molly wanted no part of this argument, though she noted that everyone was laughing at the four of them, who were trying to be as serious looking as they could. In truth, the twins felt that Jonas and Warrick were the Americans most like them, though neither had shown a talent for prank inventing as of yet. Molly pointed to a certain young man, getting in the spirit of things.

“Harry is laird of the manor, he should decide.” All eyes now turned to Harry, who didn’t care one way or the other, but wanted to be somewhat diplomatic.

“There are two of them and seven of us, let’s get theirs over with so that we can get to the important stuff. And Molly, please don’t ever call me that again.” She started laughing, and put her arms around her twins.

“You’re all heart brother, now who’s going to read?” Harry motioned for Dobby to give him the envelopes, and took out the ones addressed to the twins and kept them for himself. He gave the Junior envelopes to Lee.

He opened up the twins’ envelopes both and quickly scanned the results.

“WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU WAITING FOR!”

“Be quiet Fred, before I have Dobby force a sedative down your throat.”

“I could take him, I’m not scared of Dobby.” Harry started chuckling.

“You hear that Dobby? Big bad Fred isn’t scared of you.” Dobby looked his redheaded employer up and down, and with a straight face:

“Well Harry, I’m sure I can fix that if you will let me.”

Silence for a second, and then the room went up in a hail of laughter. Dobby held his straight face as long as he could before the giggles let loose. Fred hoisted him up onto a chair and put his arm around him.

“We’ve created a monster, this is all your fault Harry.”

“You think anyone employed by the Malfoys isn’t going to turn out a little odd? Are there anymore of them back there Dobby?” Arthur shared something with them on that one before Dobby could answer.

“Not any longer Harry, they were all sent to other homes and replaced with house elves working for The Ministry.” That got another chuckle out of Harry.

“Very good, keeping an eye on the lovely Narcissa and her spawn. That’s my man Rufus Scrimgeour. Anyhow, I’m delighted to say that, as usual, Fred’s scores and George’s scores are identical. Who would have thought that?”

“You’re just loving this, aren’t you?”

“I had a long day George, I need some release. Here goes:”

“On your Muggle Studies NEWT, you each got a P.” Neither twin had realistic hopes of a sweep, and while they had learned a lot in Muggle Studies, they were just too far behind the curve in a strange country like they had been in. It wasn’t Troll at least, and they were pleased with that small piece of luck.

“Next up is Herbology, and you both got A’s.” Fred and George both were sitting down by now, fortunately.

“Are you serious?”

“Say that again please.”

“Fred Weasley, A in Herbology. George Weasley, A in Herbology. I spoke clearly enough didn’t I?” Molly was nodding in agreement.

“Yes you did Harry dear, that’s very good boys. I know you don’t really like Herbology either, that makes it even more impressive.”

“Schulze knew what he was doing, I’ll say that much for him. A bit dry though.” The twins had only signed up for Herbology because they used some its tenets in their WWW inventions, and because it was a better fit than any of the other classes. If they would have been allowed to, they probably would have picked only four classes. Still, the two of them had amused Paul Schulze, and he subtly made a point of giving them pointers when and if needed.

“Get on with it Harry, we’re on a roll here.”

“Yes Uncle Fred. Potions: A for both of you.” Less than they had gotten on their OWL’s, but Potions is hard to leave for a year and pick right back up. Even the twins acknowledged that their good Olympic result was due more to a lack of competition.

“Okay then, a pair of A’s, with our strengths coming up.”

“Charms is next, and you both got E’s.” Another slight setback, but again, they were starting up after a year had gone by. Now, technically, they had matched their OWL totals, with one more course left to go, and George closed his eyes.

“I’m not sure I can take the last one, just get it over with Harry.” He was saving Defense for last, he looked at them and simply said:

“O.”

The reaction was instantaneous. Fred and George both leaped into the air and attempted to squeeze the life out of Harry, who was hugging them back as hard as he could.

“OH MY GOD!”

“WE DID IT!”

Bill had gotten a perfect set of O's on his NEWT's, but he would remark later to Fleur that he had not even come close to being as happy with his scores as the twins were with one O, one E, and two A's. They tried to lift Harry into the air, but he wanted no part of that.

“Put me down you hoodlums!” He had never been more proud of his partners though, they really hadn't been hoofing it through the ten weeks.

Believe it or not, they did as he wanted, and were immediately hugged by their parents, then Bill and Ginny, and even Ron.....who had a huge grin on his face, despite whatever had gone on in the past year. Fred stopped screaming first.

“Bill, you must have a portkey that will get us to Romania, we have some serious bragging to do to our less academically talented brother.” The E in Potions had made the difference, as Charlie had gotten one O and three A's. Bill laughingly shook his head.

“You can wait a week and a half guys, he'll be here then. I am so proud of you two, you worked hard and it certainly showed.”

“It was all due to.....” Fred didn't get to finish, as Harry rode him over.

“Don't even go there bro, you two did this. I just provided a safe, non-threatening educational environment.” Hermione couldn't resist a smiling dig, in response to Harry's dig.....though he was digging

Dumbledore and his merry band of semi-competent-on-the-average faculty members.

“Thanks to the Headmistress being in your back pocket.” Harry couldn’t deny the substance of that, though he could deny the spirit.

“Well sometimes she is, and sometimes I’m in her back pocket. I’m more or less her bodyguard as it is, but we have a nice arrangement.”

“I’m sure you do. Now let’s see your grades, since you had such a peaceful year studying.” Harry motioned to Lee.....who for comparison’s sake got one O, three E’s, and two A’s on his NEWT exams. He opened the one large envelope and spent a minute figuring things out.

“All right then, I think I have it. First thing on here is the overall class rank, and wouldn’t you know it, four people in this room are in the top five, and another in the top ten, with the other two pretty darn close.” Claudia let out a squeal, she knew she was back in the top ten, after temporarily being punted out by Harry’s arrival. Lee read off the gang members’ ranks.

“Reiko Aylesworth, ranked number one.”

“Drew Baylor, ranked number two.”

“Sophie Weir, ranked number three.”

“Harry Potter, ranked number five.”

“Claudia Cregg, ranked number nine.”

“Warrick Forrester, ranked number thirteen.”

“Jonas Steele, ranked number fifteen.”

Jack Straw remained in the number four spot, with his roommate, our man Ray Elwood, at number six.

Reiko had also maintained her number one ranking in Charms, right ahead of Harry and Drew. Jonas had crept ahead of Sophie in that subject, at number six to her seven. Claudia had just missed getting promoted to Advanced, finishing as the number two in Regular Charms, with Warrick at number six in the Regular rankings.

In Transfiguration, Reiko was second for the sixth year in a row, not being able to leapfrog Jack Straw, though the margin had gotten a little closer this year. Sophie stayed steady at number three, with Drew at number five. Warrick got the top spot in the Regular class, and was hereby promoted to Advanced if he wanted, and he wanted. Harry was second in Regular, with Claudia and Jonas coming in at eight and nine respectively, though they would still be in different sections than Harry, who would only have Marie Ford and his other roommates to talk to in class now.

In Wandless Magic Harry took top honors, with Reiko and Ray Elwood following him. Drew was fourth and Sophie seventh. It was worth noting that margin of victory did not translate into the overall rankings, which was bad for Harry since he was far ahead of Reiko and the others in this subject. Nor did the lists mention the margins, saying only the rankings, the only time each year that the students were publicly ranked from top to bottom. Those at the bottom in the various subject were usually very quiet the first week or so of the new term, until memories faded.

Only Harry and Jonas were taking Muggle Studies, and indeed Harry had won top honors in the Regular class. He would risk the wrath of Professor Roberto Mendoza though, and decline the spot in the Advanced class. Harry liked Ziegler quite a bit, and found his style to be engaging enough to want to continue it for another year. Jonas had finished second in the class, but the potential promotion did not go down the line until someone accepted. He wouldn't have anyway though. Harry made a point of sending a note to Ziegler, telling him that the American would be stuck with him for another year.

In Defense, it was not tough to divine who was first and second, a pair of lads called H.J. Potter and A.M. Baylor. Sophie would be fourth, behind Liesel Matthews, with Reiko fifth and Claudia ninth.

Warrick and Jonas had somehow muddled their way to the middle of the Regular rankings, finishing 12th and 13th in their class. Harry didn't work out with them at all, but was always willing to give them tips and pointers so that they could have an easier time of it. Greenleaf had noted the improvement during the year, and had asked Harry about it. Harry simply told him that osmosis must be involved.

In their other classes the gang members mostly held form. Warrick and Jonas both credited Harry and Drew for their improved performances, citing manly examples of academic hard work, however ridiculous that sounded to the women. Reiko was celebrated by all as the star of the class, even if she didn't have a clue of what she wanted to do afterward, though it would not be for a lack of options. Drew had casually mentioned to her once that he was sure that his mother would find a place for Reiko on her staff, and that idea was growing more and more on her. Hollie Baylor had been a Congresswoman for nine years now, serving four year terms and winning re-election the previous November, and Wizard Congressfolk were much like their muggle counterparts: hard to dislodge without scandal, so she would be there for years if she chose to.

Everyone was very pleased with how they did, and were duly congratulated, even if Harry grouched that he was regressing in his academic standing, going from fourth at Hogwarts to fifth at Great Lakes, and being in the bottom half of his friends to boot. He did his grouching with a smile of course.

"Ron, Neville, Warrick.....all four of us are riding in the backseat academically to our girlfriends. It just goes to show that we have good taste." The four of them shared a laugh at that, and would have been joined by Dean if he were there, as Ginny was in the top ten of her class, though she would have to wait another week for her OWL results. Angelina coughed to get their attention.

"Excuse me young Harry, but our men can't hold a candle to us NEWT-wise either." Harry hadn't forgotten that.

“Yeah, but the difference is that Gred and Forge care, even now, a lot less about school than the four of us do.” Alicia had gotten three O’s and three A’s, with Angelina getting two O’s, one E and two A’s.

“Fair point.” Fred had one more salient point for his lady.

“Besides, you make more money than we do, and do we ever complain about that?” Angelina Johnson had been picked third in the most recent Quidditch Draft, and made somewhere around 60,000 galleons per year in salary and bonuses. Fred and George were doing well, but not that well.....yet.

“A woman out earning her man, it’s a brave new world isn’t it?”

“Yes it is my dear, and you can pay for the pizza then can’t you? In honor of our great NEWT triumph.” Angelina and Alicia each gave their twin a loud kiss on the mouth.

“I was going to suggest that very thing, come on Alicia, at least we’ll get to pick the toppings this time.” They were about to leave when Harry, Drew, and Jonas all called out in unison:

“NO ANCHOVIES!”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll be back in a bit, keep practicing though.” After they closed the front door, Fred turned to the group.

“I do love that woman.” George was nodding his total agreement, Alicia Spinnet category.

“You can’t have a triple wedding with Fleur and I guys, so don’t get any ideas.”

“We’re not sharing the spotlight with you Bill, don’t you and your French lady worry about that.” That was as specific as either twin would get in front of their parents. They had told Harry and Bill that they were planning to pop the questions come Christmas Day, and

both Angelina and Alicia had given every indication that acceptances to the proposals were a done deal.

Before the ladies got back, Harry pulled his partners aside for a WWW moment.

“I am so proud of the both of you.” Big grins on all three.

“We stuck it to Dumbledore didn’t we?”

“Yeah, he’ll be crapping in his pants when he finds this out.”

“Okay I’m proud of you for that too, and I will be rubbing this in his nose during our meeting. But mostly I’m proud of how you two rose to the occasion, as you always have ever since I’ve known you.” The twins were getting a little misty at hearing that.

“Thanks brother, that means a lot to me.”

“Same here little bro, we couldn’t have done it without you.”

“It’s still not a fair trade, I get you good NEWT scores, you keeping saving my keester in battles.” Fred begged to differ, as the twins always did whenever Harry got overly grateful like this.

“We’re earning a very nice living because you gave us the start-up capital Harry, you funded our dream. You believed in us when no one else did. We’re even partner, we’re even.”

Dinner was a raucous affair, even if it stopped just short of a food fight, and only four of the pizzas had the dreaded anchovies. During dessert, the elder Weasleys took Harry aside for a brief talk. They, at Harry’s direction, went into the Death Room, Harry not having done his 10 minutes yet.....he was at the point where it helped in there even if he was not alone.

“So what’s up?” Arthur was wondering at what point that he would go from giving fatherly advice to the realm of pressing his luck, nevertheless started:

“Harry, how serious are you about this college thing?” Ah, so that was it.

“Why do I sense an argument coming?”

“Not an argument per se, but we were under the impression that you were leaning toward coming back after you graduate.”

“I apologize if I gave that impression, but if I did, it was the wrong one.” He didn’t believe that he had given such an impression, but he wasn’t so bold as to call Arthur a liar.

“You’re staying over there? Why?”

“Sophie.” The answer was quick and decisive, and gave Molly a start.

“You’re that serious about her?”

“I’m serious enough to know I would never subject her to living here long-term, at least not while the political and media situation remains the way it is. We’ll keep the house here of course, though the twins will hopefully be here full-time for a few years, with us making frequent visits.”

“Why would it be so bad for her here?”

“Because she would be the wife of The Boy Who Lived, The Boy Who Killed, The Boy Who Did Away With Voldemort.....and what would she do here if we did stay? It’s one thing for me to make the transition from here to there, but the other way round is a lot more complicated and fraught with peril.” Arthur looked dubious.

“I’m sorry Harry, but I can’t buy that. When you take out Voldemort you’ll be a hero, our entire world will be open to you.” Harry glanced at Bill, who really had kept his word about not blabbing about Harry’s Dark Lord theory.

“Please tell me that you don’t believe that Arthur.” The man himself was now at a loss for words, Harry’s question had been so plaintive, with seemingly no underlying sarcasm. Molly sat down on one of the easy chairs and looked at him.

“Harry dear, why not?”

“Because someone with enough power and ability to take out the greatest villain in our lifetimes will only be viewed with suspicion and mistrust for the rest of his days. They would always be wary that I might get a little greedy one day and try to set myself up as the next Dark Lord. They wouldn’t care that all I want is to help run WWW and play Quidditch. Dumbledore will be of no help there either, all the shots I’ve taken at him over the last year will make him revenge minded. He and his lemming like faculty members will soon be whispering to their students about the evil potential of a certain man with a scar on his forehead.” Harry was somewhat wrong about that last part, as Shepherd, Hill, and Sinistra were all barely secret Dumbledore antagonists, with Remus’ loyalty open to question as well, even if he would be the first Defense teacher in decades to come back for a repeat year.....consecutively anyway.

“You think our public that ungrateful?”

“Yes I most certainly do. The only way they won’t is if McCrae either changes sides or is somehow forced to sell The Daily Prophet. He’s done everything he can to poison the public against me, and he’s shown himself to be very skilled at it, since it’s worked.”

“Things change Harry, I honestly believe that defeating Voldemort, as I firmly believe you will, will make everything alright again. And the three of us, along with Remus and others, will make sure that Dumbledore does not harm you in the slightest afterward.”

“That’s very kind of you to say Arthur, and your sincerity in that belief means a lot to me. But come this time next year I’ll be getting ready to play my opening season of Quidditch while living in a university town somewhere in the American South, as close to a beach as possible, but I’ll probably be outvoted there.” Arthur then grasped at a final straw.....no pun intended.

“That’s a lot of money you’ll be passing up, playing in America as opposed to here.” Harry was now faced with a split-second crisis of conscience. He knew he could play Quidditch anywhere in the world, due to the trunk floo, and still be with Sophie and the gang in whatever house he rented for them. The trouble was: Was it finally time to tell Molly and Arthur about the trunk?

“Molly, Arthur, could you excuse Bill and I a moment, I need to ask him something in private.” They looked confused, but there was nothing else to do but say:

“Of course.”

Harry and Bill went into the kitchen, where Dobby and Winky were doing some dishes.

“What is it Harry?”

“I think it’s time to tell them about the trunk floo.” Bill had wondered if Harry was ever going to share that secret with anyone over the age of 30.

“You haven’t even told Ron and Hermione about that yet have you?”

“No, and it’s going to stay that way until graduation.....but your Mum and Dad, I think they should know. The question I have for you is this: How much time does Molly spend near Dumbledore?” Bill thought on that for a moment.

“Once a week at Order meetings for the most part, it’s not like the old man is going to send her on missions.”

“Then I’m willing to chance it. I think it will calm your parents’ fears somewhat if they know that I can get back to Britain on a moment’s notice, and it might stop these Q&A’s I’m getting from your Dad every time we meet. Does he grill you guys this much?”

“You’ve got it easy my friend, when Charlie passed up professional Quidditch I thought Dad was going to lock him in the attic until he changed his mind.”

“I’m sure Leonidas would have loved that.” That was the name of the ghoul up there.

“He and Charlie didn’t get along, that’s for sure. Anyway, back to Mum and Dad: I’ll give them both some Occlumency pointers if you want, just in case.”

“I want. I gave Hermione my notes on it back in the Fall, but I made a copy of them that I can dig out. Let’s go back in there.” They went back to the Death Room and Harry motioned for Molly and Arthur to come with them.

“There’s something I need to show you.” They dutifully followed Harry upstairs to the master bedroom, where Harry’s trunk was in the west corner of the room. He opened it up, demonstrating the fingerprint ID feature, and invited them to go down.

And so they did, marveling at how roomy it all was. The DOM’s had been down here once to see everything, but had not been invited back, as there was seemingly no need. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were not in the loop about the floo as of yet, though Ginny was a candidate to be told.....and maybe now was a good time for that too, a chance for him to show her that he could trust her.

“Dobby!” The wee fellow popped in.

“Yes Harry?”

“Could you discreetly get Ginny up here? Mention that her parents are up here too, that’ll help.”

“Of course Harry.” He went off, and Ginny came up the stairs a few ticks later, looking curious. Harry had come back out of the trunk to meet her.

“What’s going on Harry?”

“I need the three of you to see something, come on down into the trunk, your Mum and Dad and Bill are there waiting for us.” She went down and they joined the other three.

“Now the trunk has one amazingly terrific feature that I haven’t told you about. It has a dedicated floo, whereby you can floo to other trunks like this one, made by Mr. Anthony Hook. The trick is, distance doesn’t matter.”

“Come again?”

“It means that a person, or an elf, could go from Michigan to Diagon Alley in a matter of seconds.” Now it hit Ginny.

“Oh my God. That’s how you’ve stayed so close to the twins!” Thankfully the trunk was soundproofed, so no one outside of it heard that, not that Harry’s ringing ears could tell the difference.

“Right, there are three trunks currently in the system, and one of them is hidden in WWW. This is the second, and the other is at my private island.” Molly, ironically, looked the calmest.

“Your what?”

“I inherited a Caribbean island from Sirius, it was part of the Black family estate. Tonks just got cash, Remus got cash and the house, I got the rest of the cash, the Black Library, and Isla de Marauder. The name was my touch, if I do say so myself.” Arthur finally had a handle on things now.

“I wondered how Fred and George looked so tan all the time. So you can go back and forth whenever you want? How often do you take advantage of it?”

“Well when the twins were over here, I usually came over once a week, Sundays for the most part. Dobby and Winky use it every day, saves them a lot of energy, and the twins come over once a month on the average. They met my friends long before Christmas, and yes, we went to The Burrow through here, not via portkey. I’ve never taken a portkey ride longer than the one we used for the World Cup three years ago.....was it only three years ago? My goodness.”

“How did Ron and Hermione react to this? I’m surprised they haven’t let it slip.” Well, you see the thing about that is.....

“They don’t know about it Ginny, they’re the only ones in the house who haven’t been told.”

“It’s really gone that far?” Relieved that Ginny didn’t seem to be pissed about not being told until now, Harry answered her.

“Dumbledore has already proven that he’ll invade Hermione’s mind to get information, he did so right after the Malfoy trial. Why she didn’t inform the Ministry and have him prosecuted is beyond my limits of deduction, but that’s an argument for another time. With Ron, I couldn’t trust that he wouldn’t blab about it out of spite, and Hermione surely would have told Ron, and still would.”

“I thought she was okay at Occlumency by now?”

“I still don’t trust it, Dumbledore can break into anyone’s head, except for Voldemort’s I would think.”

“Yours?”

“I don’t know Ginny, and I’m not willing to find out, that’s why I’ve been so resistant to a meeting with him. The reason you three are in here is because I wanted to reassure you, Molly and Arthur, that if

worse comes to worse, I can go from wherever this trunk is to wherever the twins' trunk is in just a few seconds. So if WWW is under attack, I'll be there ready to kill."

"How.....where did you come up with this trunk?" The name of Anthony Hook had passed him by as Harry had said it, and the lad was now very grateful, suddenly realizing that Arthur was a senior Ministry official and that the trunk floo was highly illegal.

"On the black market, I won't say where. I have three now, and Reiko's parents are buying one as well, it makes for a great safe haven in case the worst happens. I often wonder if this thing would have survived the bombs going off at Tecumseh."

"I assume you don't want us telling Ron and Hermione about it."

"It's not because I don't trust them, its because I don't trust Dumbledore. You, Neville, and Luna see him a lot less than they do. I'll happily tell them all my little secrets the day after we all graduate.....you lot might need a time turner, since Dumbledore will doubtless schedule the Hogwarts festivities at the exact same time we do it at Great Lakes." Arthur smiled, he could see Dumbledore doing exactly that.

"We'll figure out something Harry, don't worry. Besides, its possible that The Minister will have forced Albus to retire by then."

"He told me that he would leave well enough alone as long as the old man remembered his place." Arthur sat down in Harry's recliner and sounded concerned.....so concerned that he quite forgot his youngest child was there for a moment and talked candidly to the boy he thought of as his second youngest.

"That's what worries me Harry, how easily our beloved Headmaster has knuckled under like he has. Something about it is just too easy. Now I know that Rufus is far more deft at it than Fudge, and he has Amelia's full support as well as the rest of his handpicked Department heads like myself, but I just can't see Albus continuing on like he is. He'll either resign and go underground, as he did much of your fifth

year, or he has an alternate plan up his sleeve. Perhaps you can bludgeon it out of him at your meeting.” Harry had sudden visions of ‘Did you order the Code Red!?’ flashing through his mind, but he knew that his current audience wouldn’t get the joke.

“Bludgeon will be the most gentle of my methods of persuasion at that meeting.”

“Interesting, what is your ultimate goal for that particular set-to?”

“To get him off my back, and to send enough clear messages to infiltrate that arrogant head of his that I will run my part in the war, not him.”

“And where does Rufus fit into this? Will you not follow his orders?”

“Rufus is far too smart to give me any orders right now Arthur, he would rather ask nicely and get what he wants that way. I have to admit that I admire his methods, I’m learning a lot from him.”

“So you do realize that he’s drawing you closer and closer to him?” Harry just shrugged.

“Of course, but as long as I get what I want out of the deal, I don’t mind being his poster boy. Neither of us asks for too much, and thus is never turned down.”

“Why wouldn’t you do the same with Fudge? I’m sure he made you a similar offer.” Eh, not really.

“Looking back, as I often do with these kinds of things, he did make some hints. But I wasn’t savvy enough to pick up on them at the time, and he wasn’t overt enough to make his intentions clear. It would probably have taken an outright bribe offer on his part, such as a pardon for Sirius.”

“He did let you have your emancipation.” Not the same thing, Harry thought, and then said:

“That was just to piss off Dumbledore, and because it would get me out of the country. There was no altruistic motive there, even if he didn’t tell Voldemort ahead of time what he was going to do. Look, we’d better get back down there, or certain people are going to be wondering what we’re up to. Have I calmed some fears a little bit?”

“A little bit, yes Harry you have. If I may ask one more question?” Harry occasionally wondered if James Potter or Sirius Black would have marked his card as thoroughly as Arthur had the last year, but all in all he liked the fact that the older man was willing to be so straight with him.

“Shoot.”

“Have you been inside Hogwarts since you got on your last train ride?” Remus had told Arthur about Flitwick’s concerns about Harry sneaking back in for revenge. The lad himself was a little confused by the question, but answered it honestly all the same.

“No I haven’t Arthur, I promise. The only times I’ve used the trunk and not stayed inside the shop were to have Christmas dinner with you, and for the Malfoy trial.”

Arthur and Molly believed him, and soon the six of them were back downstairs. A few people had noticed that they were gone, but fortunately none of them were named Ron or Hermione. Molly, Arthur, and Bill left before the college discussion started, and Ron and Neville chose to watch Goldeneye for the umpteenth time, feeling that they wouldn’t understand any of the debate anyway. The rest stayed to kibitz the meeting, with Hermione in particular contemplating whether or not university was right for her. Her parents made nice livings and could afford it.

It was established early on in the meeting that the boys would be outvoted no matter what they wanted, as Harry and Jonas were only going to be going part-time at most. Harry grudgingly decided that he would take a class or two if it would make them all happy, and it would. Michael Steele had made clear in his latest letter that he

would get them in wherever they wanted, though the bigger the school the better, so as to hide them more in the mix. Anything north of the Mason-Dixon Line was deemed to be rejected, no matter how good academically the school was, lots of snow and cold weather really was a deal breaker. That ruled out the Ivy League schools unfortunately, which Harry and Drew wouldn't have minded. Harry didn't have enough blizzard experience to want out just yet, and Drew rather liked the idea of being close to his mother for once. They didn't object too strenuously though, as Jonas and the ladies all wanted warm weather.

Money was another factor, and led them away from Tulane and Vanderbilt in particular. Sophie and Claudia would continue to get their scholarships, but the scholarships only covered a certain amount for private schools, not the full deal like they did for Great Lakes and the other 'high schools' in the system. Harry had already been told by both of them that they would not accept his help with the tuition and other non-house fees, so the focus turned to public schools, which the scholarships would cover in full. Harry again volunteered to put up the money, but the offer was again declined firmly. He chose not to insist, but was willing to revisit it in the future.

The prime factors, once money was taken care of in the equation, turned out to be: academics, weather, and quality of life in the town or city itself.....in that order. The debate was spirited, but surprisingly not contentious as it was far easier to eliminate schools than they had thought. Schools in coastal states soon found favor, though a few of them were inland far enough to eliminate beachside living.....though with all of them able to Apparate by then, it wouldn't much matter.

The short list of 10 schools took an hour to decide, and were as follows:

The University of Virginia

The University of North Carolina

Florida State University

The University of South Florida

Louisiana State University

The University of Texas

Texas A&M University

The University of California at Los Angeles

San Diego State University

The University of Hawaii

Informally, it was agreed that Drew and Jonas were the Virginia boosters, with Claudia favoring Florida State. Reiko and Warrick were all about Hawaii, while Sophie was the one who couldn't make up her mind. Harry was only concerned with the price of real estate wherever they went, as he had decided to buy their house and not rent one. He personally preferred Hawaii as well, but kept that opinion largely to himself.

Harry was given a sort of veto power over the three Pacific coast schools, in case he should wind up playing Quidditch in Britain. With the trunks it didn't matter where he played, but the appearance of taking a portkey and back every day to work had to matter. He had already pretty much ruled out playing for the Australasian League, preferring to stay in the parts of the world that he was at least somewhat familiar with. He would have a chat with Forttrap, his banker, before the March 31st deadline to apply for either the American draft or the British one, and the rules stated that he could only apply to one of them, as per the arrangement between the two leagues.

The maximum salary in the American League was \$100,000, though as stated before, it could be gotten around for the right person. By comparison, Canadian Seeker Owen Hart, the top pick in the 1996 British draft by the Tornados, had signed for what amounted to \$345,000 per year. Quite the difference, and if Harry hadn't already been rich, the decision would have been made long before this night.

The Americans had teams in four cities: New York City, Miami, Milwaukee, and Death Valley, California. The New York team played their games in the Hamptons, while Miami shared a stadium with the Key West Quodpot franchise. Milwaukee played in the muggle baseball stadium, even though the muggles didn't know that it had been magically enlarged, while Death Valley played in Death Valley, no matter how hot it got. If Harry had his playing preference, and the American Commissioner had implied that he would, he would play for the Miami team and they would all go to The University of South Florida. Nice and convenient, which is why it was on the list at his insistence. They all voted for their next meeting to be on Thanksgiving Day, when they would whittle the list down to the last four or five and plan some visits during the Christmas Holiday.

Afterward, Harry took the three DOM's women aside and told them that if they wanted to come along to wherever they chose, he would pay the fees as he had offered for Great Lakes. The only qualifier he put on it was that they if they took his money, he got their votes on where to go, that's our Harry. Luna politely told him that she would think about it, though she probably would not take advantage of it, she was bent on going right to The Quibbler upon graduation. Ginny and Hermione said that they would talk it over with Dean and Ron, and get back to him. Neville was already on course to replace Sprout, and there were a couple of private institutes that offered apprenticeships in Herbology, so he was all set.

Ron would have been the first to admit that he was totally unprepared for further schooling, and further more lacked the desire to make up the preparations. Arthur had quietly told him that if his NEWT's were at least half-adequate, there would be a job in the Muggle Affairs Department waiting for him, probably under Perkins. Ron liked Perkins on the whole, so at least he had that in his pocket. One Quidditch scout had told him that it was not out of the question that he might get drafted next year, but that he would have to continue on his marked improvement. That was surely the situation of choice, but there were three more official games before he could find that out.

Jonas left a little after midnight, being relatively young, he had more portkey hops to go on than the Weasley clan had. His first hop was to Dublin, followed by Iceland, Greenland, Halifax, and then finally on to

Peekskill, New York, where the United States National Quodpot Team was headquartered this summer. Just to irritate Ron, Ginny made a big show of giving Jonas a hug right before he left, whispering in his ear.

“Sell it Jonas, I want to see if steam will come out his ears.”

Jonas did indeed sell it, and whispered back.

“You know if you and that Dean guy don’t work out.....” Ginny giggled, and broke off the hug, with an appearance of reluctance. Hermione had been muttering to Ron all the while, doubtlessly telling him that his baby sister was playing him. Ron did as ordered, and nothing but some dirty looks were passed between the two siblings. Nothing remotely physical or romantic had happened in the Ginny/Jonas/Drew room, though Jonas had gone ‘dry’ for two weeks and was getting kind of antsy. He knew that every woman in the house was taken though, and thus off-limits. Peekskill had hosted the Quodpot team last year too, and he knew some local girls there, so he wouldn’t be lonely for long. He still never bragged though, only yes or no answers to his buddies, and sometimes he was reluctant to give those as well.

Harry walked Jonas out, and the American took one last look around.

“This was cool Harry, I really enjoyed myself. I wish I could stay for the entire month.”

“Me too mate, but I’m glad you could stay this long. Don’t worry, we’ll be back here sometime soon I’m sure. Have a safe trip.”

“Take care buddy.” The two slapped hands, and Jonas was away seconds later.

Wednesday, July 16th, 1997

Outskirts of Little Hangleton

8:00 pm

Edward Grant and Alan Brandon stood on the edge of the village, observing Riddle Manor through their omnioculars. At present, they were the only magical werewolves left in the pack led by Fenrir Greyback, the rest having been killed in the last three engagements, except for one special case. Somehow Voldemort had always been one step ahead of them, with three of their last four major attacks being met by Death Eater fire and disaster. Finally Greyback had been forced to use magical means to ferret out any possible informants, and lo and behold, the magic of Veritaserum had unmasked Lawrence Granger, no relation, as Voldemort's inside man in Greyback-land. Granger, a 30 year old that Greyback himself had converted, was very forthcoming under Veritaserum. He gave away everything he knew about Voldemort, and it turned out that he knew quite a bit.

Granger, no relation, had placed enough Listening Charms, perhaps with the idea of becoming a triple agent, that he knew where Riddle Manor was located. Officially, only Voldemort, Bella Lestrangle, and Peter Pettigrew were supposed to know, but loose lips sink ships, and both Lestrangle and Pettigrew were guilty of it. Voldemort would have murdered everyone in the building if he had known how careless the two of them had been, but he was not exactly a hands-on CEO, if you will. So it was that Greyback and Grant now knew most of the operational details of Voldemort's Death Eater crusade, and Grant was able to Obliviate Granger sufficiently so as not to tip anyone off.

This had all happened two nights previous, and it had taken the interim time to gather what was left of the pack at this location. There were 43 werewolves left, at least those that would take orders from Greyback, not counting their special auxiliary. Remus and Draco would not of course, and there were estimated to be another dozen werewolves hiding in plain sight in various muggle cities and towns, with no involvement in this business one way or the other. Granger estimated that Voldemort had 30 Death Eaters living in the house, the bad man included, with roughly 250 more living outside of it. So once the werewolves got inside, they would have the numbers advantage, as long as they moved quickly enough. Riddle Manor was totally anti-portkey warded except for one spot in the basement, and all the

windows but one were charmed so that no one could see out them, or in them for that matter.

Edward Grant was an occasional pen-pal of Michael Sheen in America, and while Sheen had certainly not informed him of the February assault ahead of time, he had taken the opportunity of giving Grant and his boss an after action report. Particular emphasis was placed on the roles of Fred, George, and Harry in the fight, and with the WWW three now back in Britain, it was worth noting. Also, while Grant and Greyback wanted no part of using muggle weapons against the Death Eaters, they preferred to keep the Aurors on the sidelines, they had picked up some useful tips on what to do, and more importantly what not to do.

“What do you see Alan?” The other magical had been doing scans of the surrounding area for the last five minutes.

“My scan showed three Aurors at three different listening posts. One in the graveyard, one in the garden near the house, and the last one at the beginning of the driveway leading to the house. They’re all under Disillusionment Charms, but I have a hard time believing that the Dark Wizards don’t know about them and exactly where they are.” Which was true.

“Our plan is clear, the Aurors are not to be engaged unless they attack us first.”

“Is Fenrir considering some kind of alliance with them?”

“I’m sure it has crossed his mind, but right now our focus is on the Death Eaters. Our pact with them was always ill-advised, and I told him so, but he was too bent on getting the money. No longer.” Greyback and Grant had nearly come to blows whenever they argued about said pact, though that was their only area of substantial disagreement. Grant had been proven correct, but had made no attempt at a coup.....so far. Greyback himself came up to them.

“Is everything how it should be?”

“It is Fenrir, the house is still empty to our scans, but the surrounding area is the same as it was yesterday at this time.”

“Good, the auxiliary is ready for their part of the attack.”

“It should be soon, the Imperious will be wearing off soon.” Probably in another two hours, if Grant’s memory served him well. Mind tricks on that large a group were temporary at best, and Grant was only a medium level Wizard.....think Warrick, with pale skin and an Irish accent.

“Ten minutes, and the assault will begin, everyone else is in place now. You have the signals ready?”

“We do.”

“Good luck then, and good hunting.” Greyback left, he wasn’t one for motivational speeches. Brandon turned to Grant with a suggestion.

“Perhaps a word of warning to the Aurors out there, better to get them to leave us alone.” Brandon, despite being the deputy magical in the pack after all the losses, was otherwise not high in Greyback’s council.

“I thought about that, but there is the chance that they might join their magical brethren against us. No, they need to be just as surprised as the Death Eaters. That will make them delay and call for instructions, giving us precious time to do our business.” Brandon gave up the ghost on that one and nodded his head.

“All right then. I’m ready.”

“As am I. Remember what to do in case things take a turn for the disastrous.”

“I do, we meet in front of that joke shop in Diagon Alley and go from there.” Of course that plan only worked for the two of them, as Lawrence Granger was scheduled for a hideous death when this was

all over, and none of the others could see Diagon Alley in the first place.

Grant nodded, and waited for the auxiliary to be brought up, and when they were, gave them their final instructions.

“When you start your run, go as hard as you can until you breach the doors. Once you do that, use your implements to kill as many in front of you as you can, but take care not to kill each other. If there is no one to kill, destroy the inner parts of the house bit by bit. You will do this until you are dead. Count to 30 in your heads, and then charge. Do not fail us.” Not quite William Wallace before the Battle of Stirling Bridge, but it would do for now.

The werewolf auxiliary weren't werewolves at all, they were muggles picked off the street by Grant and Brandon, mostly in London. The cannon fodder were chosen for their physical strength, they were all men, and had axes in hand ready to do damage. Grant had put them each under Imperious earlier in the day, and his energies were spread so thin that the curse wouldn't last much longer. The cannon fodder, numbering 30 men, were 350 meters from the house.

They silently counted from 30 on down, and then began running. Since these men were not exactly doing this voluntarily, there were no screams or Braveheart style yells. They simply charged toward their target, axes at the ready, and were stopped only by the need to batter their way through the doors and windows in front of them. That exposed the single overt weakness in the Riddle Manor defenses:

Riddle Manor was loaded with more wards than any single building in Britain, besides Hogwarts. What it did not have, however, were any sort of Muggle Repelling Charms. The bad man felt that a sudden visual disappearance of the house would raise too many questions, and the idea of wiping out an entire town was a little too much even for him. The manor was laden with so many rumors and innuendos, particularly since the death of the muggle caretaker three years previous, that it had been months since anyone had even approached it, and that was a teenager on a dare. In other words, it had become the Little Hangleton version of The Shrieking Shack, which suited Voldemort's purposes very nicely.

The fodder reached the house without delay and three of them immediately began hacking at the front door, which was secured by both a standard muggle door lock, and the same sort of Sealing Charm that Harry had placed on the Cortez doors during the Lycan invasion. The axes dealt with this quite nicely, and soon all 30 of them were entering the manor. This was where the fun began.

The main door was never meant to be used by anyone at all, and there were multiple Alarm Charms on it, and they went off like a banshee as the doors crumbled inward. There were in fact 32 Death Eaters currently in the manor, and they all leapt up from whatever they were doing and charged toward the front doors.....with the exception of a few.

Voldemort was downstairs in a meeting with his department heads when all hell broke loose, and his immediate theory was that it was the Aurors finally invading. His inner council: Pettigrew, Nott, and all three Lestranges, was with him, along with Michael Parrish, the mercenary Potions Master.

“Bella, go see what’s going on, the rest of you stay here.” These meetings were always held in the same basement room where the anti-portkey ward had been dissolved, just in case something like this happened. The room was directly below the foyer, and they could hear faint sounds of the axes, the house being as thickly walled and floored as The Hollow. Bella left, wand at the ready, and Pettigrew pulled something out of his pocket: An Extendable Ear. No, he was not so stupid as to have bought one directly from the shop, but many months ago Draco had gotten him a supply of them, again bought through nominees.

He walked up to where the sounds were the loudest, and listened in.

“ Axes from the sound of it, I don’t hear any spells or curses.....okay, now I do.”

That would be the initial echelon of Death Eaters making contact with the invaders, and the curses began to fly.

“Sounds like only our people are using wands Master, I don’t think these people are Aurors.”

“Are they muggles from the village? Why would they attack now of all times?” Wary of theorizing with Voldemort in the room, Pettigrew chose not to say too much.

“I couldn’t begin to tell you Rastaban, only that they’re getting butchered from the sound of it.”

And they were, in a fight between a large man with an axe and a small man with a wand, you don’t need to be a Ladbroke’s bookmaker to know which person to place a wager on. Still, enough surprise was gained the muggles that they did inflict a few casualties among the magicals, though no one who has yet been a player in our story. Edward Grant had not been that diligent in his mind-controlling of his fodder, and thus none of them went upstairs or otherwise did anything creative. They managed to level most of that main floor before the Vincent Crabbe Sr. led Death Eaters crashed into them, filling the air with Avada Kedavra.

Meanwhile the werewolves outside had started moving about 30 seconds after the muggles, only they were not running, just walking quickly. They wanted to give the muggles a chance to breach the door and do whatever damage could be done, not that they expected much. The beauty of this type of gambit is that it could be done over and over again, it would certainly give Voldemort a few ideas. Greyback had one wing, and Grant the other as they spread out all around the manor, waiting for the muggles to be finished off and the post-victory lull to set in.

Voldemort finally got curious, and led the rest of his people upstairs, where Bella met them at the top of the stairwell to give her report.

“Well Bella?”

“There were over two dozen muggles, armed with axes, and all of them appear to be under the influence of Imperious. We have one

alive for questioning, but the rest were killed by Avada Kedavra fire.” Voldemort had a very agile mind, but even he was perplexed by what was going on here.

“How many of our people were lost?”

“Four dead and three wounded Master, no one of any supreme importance in either category.”

“Bring the prisoner downstairs for questioning, we’ll use drugs first. Michael, get some Veritaserum prepared immediately.”

“Yes sir.” Voldemort and Parrish got along very well as it turned out, and while the mercenary was not quite a confidant yet, the man was probably the closest thing Voldemort had to a friend, though the concept was something the bad man had nothing but contempt for. Parrish ran back downstairs as Bella and her husband roughly half-threw the muggle prisoner down after him. The bad man did a quick inspection of the considerable damage to the front area, and then slowly glided back downstairs. He was halfway down when ‘All hell breaking loose, the sequel’ started up.

Meanwhile:

The three Aurors outside were led by Sanford Jenkins, who was the Auror leading the entire Riddle Manor listening post system, and was widely believed to be next in line if Travis were to be promoted or otherwise. He and his crew, Sally Pickett and Guinevere Cornwell, happened to be meeting at the time, and watched in mute fascination as the muggles stormed the house, and stormed it quietly no less. They were not in a visual position to have seen the werewolves before they started their march up to the manor, but soon they saw the second wave, but had no indication that these men weren’t muggles as well, since they had not made the change yet. They did note the lack of overt weapons though.

“Sally, get back to The Ministry and inform them of what’s happening.” Sally, the junior member of the crew, immediately popped off.

“What the hell is going on up there San?” Jenkins collected his thoughts for a couple of seconds and answered her.

“Someone put Imperious on some of the villagers it looks like, they’re going to get butchered if they manage to get inside. Let’s go up for a closer look, but don’t interfere, we want whoever that is to draw out the Death Eaters if they’re in there.” The listening post system had been going on for so long that there were quiet rumblings in Auror Command that it was nothing more than a wild goose chase, since nothing had come of it. Well something was coming of it now, as the two of them inched forward to get a better look. Jenkins took out his omnioculars and zoomed in on the front door.

He saw the muggles breach the front door and front windows all, and then green magical light almost lit up the entire house as Crabbe and his soldiers made contact. Jenkins and Cornwell slowly moved forward as they heard the screams, stopping at about 30 meters away, the closest they were willing to get. At least the presence of Death Eaters had been confirmed anyway.

“Why is the second wave going so slowly San?”

“I have no idea, but they’re about to get slaughtered by the look of it.”

Indeed the green light had now subsided, and much milling about could be heard in the house as the second wave got into position.....at every point around the house but the front, with at least 10 werewolves on each undamaged side.

Fenrir Greyback then let out a piercing whistle, muggle-style, and his pack all made the change. This was not done so loudly that the Death Eaters inside could tell its significance, and so it was a surprise when the first floor of the house seemed to explode at once, as the werewolves all went inside the hard way. Jenkins saw this from the short distance and had Cornwell immediately go back to Auror Command and get reinforcements.....this might be their big chance.

He moved another few meters forward, and now could hear most of what was going on inside.

Voldemort and his basement folk heard the cacophony and sprinted back upstairs to find that Crabbe and his people were getting torn apart by Greyback's werewolves, who finally had the strategic initiative and were taking full advantage of it. The numbers were somewhat equal, but the werewolves had a plan and all the Death Eaters could do was react to it. Crabbe, as it happened, was quite a good fighter, but after killing two of the werewolves, he was cut down by two pairs of claws to his face, ripping it to shreds. Voldemort watched this, and after calmly leveling a killing curse.....wandlessly.....at one of Crabbe's killers, he yelled to Bella.

“Get some people here now! The Aurors outside will certainly have seen this!” That was his real fear, that a Travis Biller-led cadre of Aurors was about to drop at his doorstep. He touched his hand to the tattoo on his left arm, which should in theory call the rest of the Death Eaters over. It was however, the one fault that losing his wand to Harry had brought up so far.....his hand didn't work as well with the snake call as his wand did. Some Death Eaters got their calls, some didn't, and without knowing it Voldemort understood the anxiety of every early cell phone user. The backup plan, and he did have one, was a set of mirrors in the basement office, next to the portkey area. That's where Bella was racing right now. Parrish was down there with the barely alive prisoner, but he would do more harm than good in a battle, so she merely ignored him and went on with her summoning.

Along with Pettigrew and the Lestrangle brothers, he quickly regained the advantage for his Death Eaters, including foot soldier Lucius Malfoy. The close confines of the battle worked against the magicals though, and the ferocity of the werewolf attack was beginning to take its toll. His forces were down to about a dozen left, with Malfoy now lying on the ground with a cracked skull from a ferocious swipe from Alan Brandon. He wasn't dead though, even if he soon wished he would be. The werewolves had lost half their strength, as the magicals fought a lot better than they had thought. It had always been in the back of Voldemort's mind that the Aurors would eventually

strap on their minerals and invade the place, so the troops he kept close were generally good fighters.

Then Bella came up from the basement with 20 fast reacting Death Eaters, and their only problem was avoiding hitting their own people, but hitting five werewolves immediately was not a problem, and the invaders were down to ten. Then Grant and Brandon, who were in the southwest corner of the main living room and were about to be pinned down, showed their true colors, so to speak:

They took out their wands, and howled Avada Kedavra curses, flush at the backs of Rastaban and Rodolphus LeStrange, who had had been half turned around by a call from their Master to come support Pettigrew and Nott. The brothers went down as if poleaxed, and were dead before their bodies connected to the ground. The Death Eaters within viewing of this froze for a brief moment, in horror one could suppose, at the sight of two werewolves wielding wands.

It was only brief moment because all four who witnessed this were torn apart by Greyback and Castor Archer, Biller's inside man in the pack.....the Veritaserum questions had not been so specific as to unmask him. Amateurs.

Speaking of Travis, he had been in his office doing paperwork when Sally Picket came back with her report. He collected the Aurors on duty and portkeyed in just in time to see Greyback's men make the change and enter the house, having crossed magical paths with Guinevere Cornwell. Pickett was detailed to remain behind to coordinate sending more Aurors if needed. There were now 12 Aurors on site, and Travis took command.

"All right then, as soon as things die down in there we attack. Whatever wards and booby-traps they have in there have already been set off by the muggles and the werewolves. We wait for the chaos to stop, then we start more chaos with whichever side ends up winning. Let's approach the front door cautiously, and be ready to move at my signal."

Inside the house, another phalanx of 15 Death Eaters came up from the basement and joined the fight, and Greyback, seeing that there

would be no outright victory this day, gave out another piercing whistle.

That signaled those left alive to go upstairs, and set up ambushes in as many individual rooms as they could, with the underlying hope that Voldemort would not choose to level his own home with them up there. Greyback himself joined Grant and Brandon, and they took the prudent route and got the hell out of Dodge. They exited the living room window, and sprinted away, narrowly dodging some long-range spells that Biller and Jenkins tossed out at them. The spells were silent though, and no one inside the house noticed that there were more guests on the front lawn.

“That’s the beginning of the retreat, there must be no more werewolves left inside. As soon as the yelling stops we go in.”

The yelling didn’t stop for a few minutes yet, as the Death Eaters had to go room to room in order to clear out the remaining werewolves. This was not a pleasant experience, as there were six werewolves ready and waiting for them, and eight Death Eaters were killed during the summer cleaning, with Castor Archer killing two of them and escaping through a window. The house was finally cleared, and Voldemort had Nott count up the dead.

“We lost 42 people in both attacks My Lord, and there appear to be 40 werewolf bodies, along with the muggles. Peter, did you recognize Greyback at all?” Pettigrew, Bella, and Voldemort were the only ones present who had seen Greyback in human form.....well, present and conscious that is, as Malfoy was slowly bleeding to death on the floor. It’s not like they had a medic available for such things.

“No Frederick, but I heard his voice, he was in here. Grant was here too, the magical one of them.” They didn’t know about Brandon it seemed.

“What about our inside man?” Voldemort took a bit of humor from the fact that his personal werewolf traitor shared the same last name as one of Potter’s closest friends. He had even had Nott do a muggle background check to see if his Granger was related to Potter’s, but

the name was common enough that one would probably have to go back a few hundred years, if even then. A pity, it would have made for some taunting fun.

“I didn’t see him Master.”

“Very well. Nott, supervise the policing up of the bodies. Wormtail, check outside, make sure our tame Aurors are still where they should be. Bella, will you be alright?” Bellatrix Lestrange was the cruelest woman any of them had ever met, but she had just lost her husband all the same. She may have had an ‘arrangement’ with Voldemort, but she was still very attached to her marriage in many ways. She was Voldemort’s favorite though, and was the only one who would get such words from him.

“Give me a task Master.” Good girl, he thought.

“Come with me downstairs, we will question the muggle together. I think we can divine what their plan was, but it would be better to make certain.” Nott had left them to start the body detail, and Pettigrew was walking to the front door.

“Yes Master.” The pair of them went back downstairs again, and again were almost at the bottom when the third wave struck. It was the Wizard’s version of the Battle of Midway: the muggles were the torpedo planes, the werewolves the planes from Midway island itself, and the Aurors were Spruance’s dive bombers, the coup de grace.

The Aurors began their attack, and the Death Eaters, already tired and hurting from fending off two previous assaults, didn’t stand a chance.

Biller and Jenkins were out front and took out four Death Eaters with Avada Kedavra before the villains knew what was going on. Pettigrew ducked behind the blasted open door, and quickly turned into rat form. He scampered through the chaos, and only reverted to human form upon reaching his Master.

“It’s the Aurors Master, Biller is leading them.” Enough was enough, they were going to have to retreat from the manor anyway, as the Auror suspicions had already been confirmed this night. Pettigrew hadn’t bothered to see how many Aurors there were, and the bad man had no interest in tangling with the entire Auror Command and probably The Dark Force Defense League to boot, not after losing 20 percent of his soldiers. If he knew that there were only 12 of them, that would be a different story, however tough he knew Biller to be.

“Bella, Michael, pack everything up in here that you can in the next two minutes. Whatever you can’t get ready in that amount of time, destroy in place. Wormtail, get out of here and begin alerting our reserves that Riddle Manor is now no longer operational, and to meet at our secondary location.” The secondary location was a remote island in The Orkneys, and was where Parrish had most of his long and medium term potions brewing. A collective:

“Yes Master.”

Voldemort then took a deep breath, and magnified his voice to the Death Eaters above.

“Attention all troops.....Code Black! I repeat: Code Black!”

Code Black meant that the manor was being abandoned, and for them to make their way to the Orkney location. They all had a portkey necklace that would take them there, but just one. Again, only Bella and Pettigrew among the staff knew where it was.....Nott was out and about too much to be trusted with that knowledge, as he was the most ripe for capture.

The Nott-led soldiers up on the main floor, who were losing a man about every five seconds as it was, heard the signal and immediately ran to the walls, where there was more space open to the outside air than there was actual wall, thanks to our werewolf friends. As Voldemort had wanted not wanted to attract attention, there were no anti-Apparition wards around the house, so as soon as they got clear they were gone.....leaving a further 21 dead from Auror fire, the Aurors having lost just one man themselves, 32 year old James

Stuart.....not that family of Stuarts, no royalty in his family tree. More Aurors were coming in now, led by Nelson DeMille, who was third in command behind Travis and Jenkins. There were now 30 Aurors inside the manor.

Biller, who had taken down five of the enemy himself, screamed out to his troops:

“Tear this place apart! There must be hiding places, I don’t care what you have to do.” He was hoping for at least one high-level casualty from the other side, hopefully one alive and available to be questioned.

They quickly found their man in Lucius Malfoy, who was not quite dead yet. A quick Tourniquet Spell and his bleeding stopped, funny how his enemies were more concerned with keeping him alive than his supposed friends. He was transported to The Ministry immediately, where he was put under heavy guard as the medical folk worked on him.

Meanwhile, the Aurors identified the Lestrangle brothers as two of the dead, and since they were killed by Avada Kedavra, they just assumed that they had been the ones to do it, not Grant and Brandon. They took over Nott’s duties of body cleanup, and Obliviators had a busy night in the muggle portion of Little Hangleton, relieving people of their memories of all that noise up at the haunted manor house.

The basement level was not hidden, so it only took a couple of minutes for Jenkins and DeMille to make their way down there. It turned out that Bella and Parrish were very efficient packers of equipment, so there was nothing there to find.....except for the portkey area, which explained quite a bit upon later reflection.

As this was going on, Rufus joined his friend outside. Bones was in France for a week, meeting with her counterpart in the French Ministry, and she would be very pissed to miss all of this.

“Well Travis, another great victory for our side. The werewolves were all but wiped out, and our Dark friends took a shellacking.” He looked like he was about to dance a jig.

“I can’t believe they lost 64 Death Eaters, that has to be at least 1/3 of their force.” It was ¼, but the guess was close enough.

“What do you suggest we do about the house?” Biller smiled, and addressed his friend by his first name, something he only did in private.

“Rufus my friend, I think the muggles are going to wake up to find that Riddle Manor has burned down. Odd, how the fire can’t be put out by water, must be one of those electrical fires or something.” Rufus very much liked that idea, it would have something of a negative effect on Voldemort when he found out, but too bad for him.

“Yes, funny how that can happen sometimes. Strip the place of any intelligence, then set your fires. I’ll have some people throw up some Muggle Repelling Charms to delay any fire brigades that might be inclined to interfere.”

“Got it. Do you want to me to come with you to the Stuarts?”

“Yes, but we’ll do it come morning, you’re needed here now. Did he leave a wife and children behind?”

“He was engaged to be married, but I think things fell apart in the last month. He was a good man.”

“We’ll make sure his parents know that. Come, I’ll help with the cleanup in there, I’m getting a yen for some of my old work.”

“I really do love having a former Auror as Minister.” They went inside the house to finish things up, this had been a very good night.

Meanwhile, in Diagon Alley:

Fenrir Greyback, Alan Brandon, and Edward Grant entered the Alley at the junction between Diagon and Knockturn, as they had not needed to split up after their escape. There was little foot traffic there at this time of night, most businesses closed by dinnertime. Greyback had only been in the Alley a couple of times, and was curious as to why they were there now.

“What are we doing here?” He didn’t catch on until it was too late.

“This is the best place to hide Fenrir, the magicals would never look for us here.”

“You have a bolt hole here of all places?”

“Of a sort, don’t worry, I’ve taken care of everything.” They walked up to where WWW was located, and Grant and Brandon abruptly stopped.

“We’re here Fenrir.”

“ And where is here? Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes? What significance does this have for us?” Grant and Brandon took out their wands, and Greyback looked around as if they might be under attack any second. No one was around, to the relief of Grant.

“It’s the end of the line my friend. I’m sorry.” He and Brandon pointed their wands at Greyback, and before their leader could react:

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Fenrir Greyback was no Harry Potter, so a pair of Killing Curses to his chest put him down for the count, permanently. Grant quickly used a Slicing Charm while Brandon conjured up a long stake.

They disposed of the rest of the body, while leaving Greyback’s head on the stake, right in front of WWW.

It would be some welcome for the first customers of the morning, only 10 hours away.

End Chapter

Author's Note: The Remus and Dumbledore talks may or may not be in this chapter. Whenever they happen, just know that all I'm doing is playing with the gaps in canon, not messing with pre-HBP canon itself. I hope, it's a fine line really, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black are the most inconsistent characters in canon, and some of the contradictions in their characters just can't be worked out. On a stylistic note, once the Remus and Dumbledore talks happen, all questions will be asked by Harry unless the responder names someone else in their answer.

Thursday, July 17, 1997

8:00 am

WWW

It was quite a sight in front of the shop, as Lee Jordan had discovered when he unlocked the doors at 7:45 am. Passers-by had not really thought much of it, assuming it was a WWW advertising gimmick of some sort. Lee happened to be in charge of the shop's advertising as it were, so he immediately called over to the twins at The Hollow, who called The Ministry, who promised to send someone right away.

Bones herself came over, along with Harry and Travis, who had been about to start dueling again. Bones preferred to handle anything to do with Harry personally, a lesson learned after the Dementor incident two years previous. The six of them just stood there looking at the head, and words seemed to fail. Bones found her voice first, she had been summoned from France after the Riddle Manor extravaganza the night before and was still trying to get a handle on the aftermath of it.....and this appeared to be more aftermath.

"Well Travis, is that who I think it is?" Lee hadn't had any idea of whom the head belonged to, and it took the Aurors a minute to process what they were seeing.

"It sure appears to be Fenrir Greyback Amelia, or a very skilled facsimile." Lee felt he should say something here.

“Um, for what it’s worth, I touched it and it’s not fake. I mean it’s a real head and all.” They had been wondering just that, and the other five were quite relieved that they didn’t have to be the ones to test it. Bones turned to Harry.

“Harry, you wouldn’t happen to know where Remus Lupin would be right now would you?” Harry shrugged.

“Beats me, let’s see what Dobby can do about that. Dobby!” The wee fellow popped in, looked at the head on the stake, and appeared as though he was going to throw up. Harry patted him on the shoulder and gently turned him away from the exhibit.

“Easy there mate. Please pop over to Grimmauld Place and see if Remus is there. If he is, get him over here please. Wake him up if you have to, but don’t tell him about this. Just say it’s urgent.” Dobby gulped, and then nodded. He had lived at the Order Headquarters, so he was in the know and could therefore bypass the Fidelius that was still on it, though the secret keeper had been changed to Remus himself.

“Right away Harry.” He was off.

“Let’s hope he’s there, Dobby hates going into Hogwarts.....and beyond that, I can’t think of where he might be.” Dobby was back in a jiffy.

“He was asleep Harry, but I woke him as you instructed. He said to give him five minutes.” Since nobody was too eager to see Remus in his pajamas, that answer sufficed. Travis turned to the WWW three.....plus Lee.

“Okay, just for the official record, none of you have any idea why Fenrir Greyback’s head would be staked outside your shop?”

“Nope.” That was Fred.

“No clue.” George.

“I haven’t the slightest.” Lee.

“Beats me.” Harry.

The two Aurors had little trouble believing that, but the forms had to be obeyed nonetheless. Biller gave them the three minute, slightly edited, spiel on what had happened at Riddle Manor, and the teenagers’ eyes got wider with every twist in the tale, he had not had a chance to talk about this with Harry before they were summoned over. He had just described the tragic fire that burned the house down to ashes when Remus Apparated to a spot a few feet from them. He looked sleepy and irritable, maybe they had yanked him out of a good Tonks dream or something.

“What’s so important?”

Everyone simply pointed to the exhibit.....and the now seven people clustered around it was beginning to attract some attention, and Bones and Biller were rather public figures in their little community. Remus saw the head, but immediately started scoffing.

“You wake me up for this? This isn’t a funny joke twins, though you got a lot of the details right.” Fred and George looked at each other for a second.

“Remus, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I don’t think our top two Auror types would take time out of their busy mornings to play a prank on you.” Biller started chuckling, which didn’t help sell that premise, and even Bones was now smiling, though a little tightly as George took over.

“Besides, this really isn’t our bag you know.”

“So this is real? Fenrir Greyback’s head is really on a post outside your shop?” That was confirmation as far as Biller and Bones were concerned, and Travis took possession of said head and conjured a

bag to put it in, while Bones took care of the stake, before any more rubbernecking could take place.

“Thank you Remus, you just gave us positive identification. Fred, George, can we rely on you to tell Remus about last night?”

“Of course Madam Bones, you can count on us.” A year and a half ago Bones would never have believed that, but times had changed and she could change with them. She gave the two of them an approving look.

“I know I can. Harry, are you coming back with us?”

“Yes ma’am. Guys, I’ll stop by for lunch before I do my stuff with Robert Marr.” This would be Harry’s first session with Marr, due to the vagaries of the tutoring line-up and Marr’s own duties.

“Gotcha. Have fun you two, don’t kill each other by accident.” There had been an incident with a desk the last time Travis and Harry had dueled, this would be time number three. No broken bones, but they made a point of removing all the furniture from any room they were dueling in.

The three of them went inside the shop to floo back over to The Ministry, as Harry had not passed his Apparition test yet. The others went back into the shop, which thankfully had no customers yet.

“So what the hell is going on here, and why did Bones treat you two like you’re on her staff?” Fred was more shaken than George by all this, and the shot about Bones stung a little too.

“We know damn little more than you do Remus, so don’t come in here with an attitude. You didn’t have the head of the third most wanted man in magical Britain put on a stake in front of your shop now did you?” Presumably he had Voldemort and Pettigrew as the top two. Fred took over then.

“Bones knows that we’re Harry’s confidants, and that to trust him is to trust us. And since her boss is now fully allied with our young lad,

that means she is, and so on and so forth.” Remus was finally calming down, after the rather abrupt way he had been forced to start his morning.

“If you say so, so what’s the story with Greyback?” They took him back to the living room and told him pretty much what Biller had said, all three of them taking turns, the bell on the door would alert them to any customers. Remus was thunderstruck at how the werewolf population of Britain had been so sharply reduced.....there were now roughly 15 left, he and Draco included. And there was the teeny, tiny factor of Greyback being the one who had turned Remus himself. He sat down on the couch and held his head in his hands.....this had been a rough month for him so far on an emotional level. Fred seemed to come to a decision.

“Remus mate, I don’t know what to say here, but if you need to vent about things, we’re here for you.”

“Yeah, we have to listen to Junior do it all the time, so we’re professionals in that sport.” Remus chuckled at hearing that.

“I appreciate that twins, I really do. I need some time to think though, so I might take you up on that later.”

“Should we go get Tonks?” He shook his head in the negative.

“No, she’s at work now and I don’t want to bother her. I’m sure she knows about the Riddle Manor victory, we’ll talk tonight.” Sensing an opportunity, and Remus being in a weak moment, Lee tried to sneak a fast one by the older man.

“Out of curiosity.....” The pitch wasn’t that fast.

“Yes Tonks and I are a couple, we just agreed to make you people work for the information.”

“Hey, we’re all in favor of it.”

“Yes we are.”

“100 percent for sure.”

“It’s so nice to have your collective blessings. Now I’m in need of a shower, and I do have a few things to do today, as I’m sure you tycoons do too.” He got up as if to leave.

“You’re coming for dinner Saturday right?” The previous Saturday had been cancelled when Tonks got called into work at the last minute, and Remus was unwilling to go without some moral support, though Harry had again assured him that the talk didn’t have to happen until the day before the wedding.

“I’ll be there, and I’ll be ready for Harry.” George made the unusual choice of trying to defuse a thing and send a blunt warning, all at the same time.

“Let’s not build this into some huge thing Remus, he just wants to know about his Mum and Dad.....and why you bloody people never protected him from the Dursleys. And let me tell you Remus, you had better have a very good explanation for that.” He didn’t say ‘or else’, but that’s how Remus took it.

“Or else what?”

“Or else you will be shut out of Harry’s life for good. He’s always going to be angry about that little period in his life and how he got there. Dumbledore is the main source of his fury to be sure, but you aren’t on thick ice there either, however much affection Harry has for you.”

“You speak for him?” Fred answered him.

“You know we do Remus, and he speaks for us. The trick with our relationship with him is only one of us speaks at a time.” The twins always had a swagger about them, and it hadn’t really been added to in the two years since they had become partners with Harry. So while

there may have been reflected glow off of their partner, they didn't let it go to their heads like many might have. Harry had been right when he told Ron and Hermione that Fred and George just walked around with confidence, as if the world really was their oyster. Remus and Tonks had both picked up on this a long time ago.

"Aren't all three of you very clever. I will answer Harry's questions truthfully, no more no less. I'm just his warm-up for Dumbledore anyway." No one knew that better than Remus himself, and it did give him a small amount of comfort before the verbal battle began.

"Yes you are, and the difference is, we can pretty much guarantee that no wand will be drawn on you. Can't say the same for the old man." Remus was more than a little relieved to hear that, as he did believe that the twins spoke for Harry, though The Boy Who Lived was not aware of this series of warnings.

"Well thank heaven for small favors." He was smiling though, and he really did leave a few minutes later for home, then parts unknown. Lee looked at his buddies and sighed.

"You really believe there'll be no carnage Saturday night?" The twins sighed too, though their act was now done.

"Not really."

"Nope."

It was all about getting Remus to Godric's Hollow in the first place, that was what they considered the hard part. Harry had said that there would be no violence, but he had technically made no promises. Time would tell.....and so would Veritaserum, they had some ready for Remus' drink.

Meanwhile, at The Ministry:

The three of them, Bones, Biller, and Harry got out of the main floor station in Auror Command, and walked back to the training room. Bones usually watched at least a little of the sparring, hoping to pick

up on new tricks that she could have other crews work on. That was one of the things she prized about the Rufus/Harry alliance, in that Harry had not been trained in the traditional Auror way of doing things, and his lateral thinking and movie-inspired tactics were proving to be quite valuable. Once they were in the room, she waited for the inevitable Harry grilling, and she was not disappointed, as it began as soon as the door was shut.

“All right then, since we’re alone now. Any theories on why Greyback’s head was staked outside our shop? What about your inside man?” Travis looked to Bones, and she gave him the nod.....he deferred to her whenever possible so that she wouldn’t get her back up so much about his friendship with Rufus.

“Our inside man has not made contact yet, but he was not among the dead. His name is Castor Archer.” He was hoping for a reaction to the name, and got it.

“Why does that name sound familiar?”

“His sister was killed in The Battle of Hogsmeade Village, she was a member of the Order of Phoenix.”

“That’s right, the twins mentioned something about her. So whoever killed Greyback was magical too.....was this Archer guy.....”

“No he wasn’t, he was a squib. His parents were muggleborn wizards, with his sister being the only child who was magical. He could not have entered Diagon Alley on his own, the parents are living overseas, and we confirmed last night that they are still over there.

“So they have at least one magical among them.”

“Yes they did, and again, no magical werewolves were killed during the attacks. We have ways of checking, and all that were killed were the muggles and the regular werewolves.”

“Where did the muggles come from?”

“ We have people checking on that, they weren't from Little Hangleton itself, we know that much. They could just be random folk they snatched off of the street, I don't know.” Bones took over.

“Harry, do you have any theories about this? Things Lupin might have said or hinted at?” Well that was a small problem.

“He hasn't said much really, the one dinner we had was most of our contact in the last year, and we didn't talk much business.”

“You didn't have the family talk with him yet?”

“No Travis, he just looked too shattered the one time he was there. The house really got to him. What about Draco? Did he give any clues?” Bones shook her head.

“No, we didn't see him as a priority last night, and didn't know about Greyback until a few minutes ago. His memories of his abduction were Obliviated very, very thoroughly. Dumbledore went inside there and really took his time to be thorough. Nothing was gleaned.”

“Well I'll try with Remus on Saturday, you don't have to ask me to, I'm just as curious as you are. You think the ones who killed Greyback are throwing a peace feeler out to you?”

“That, on the surface, seems to be the most logical play here for them, given how their big plan blew up in their faces.” Biller and Bones were saving the knowledge about Edward Grant for after Harry's talk with Remus, as they knew they would get a full report on anything relevant.

“But didn't the Death Eaters lose a lot of people too?”

“Yes they did, and I would not want to be one of Voldemort's minions right now, his temper must be way in the red. But he has more numbers than they do, and he's replenished before, after the trial and the Hogsmeade disaster.”

“Isn’t the barrel pretty close to the bottom though?”

“Then he’ll simply find another barrel, he’s a persuasive man.”

“But he’s been on the losing side of two battles in a row now, and he lost a lot of manpower at the trial.” Bones smiled at that, if only it was that simple. She relished the chance to join the political education of young Harry though.

“Doesn’t matter, or at least it doesn’t matter as much as you might think. He doesn’t offer his people power, that is for him and him alone, and everyone knows that when they sign on the dotted line. What he offers to them is to let no conscience be their guide. They can murder, rape, destroy to their hearts’ content. That’s a powerful thing to offer someone, and it appeals to more people than we would care to count.”

“How sure are you that he doesn’t have people in here?”

“We’re very sure now, over the last month we’ve done Veritaserum questioning of everyone in the building, that’s over 200 people, and all have passed but two, and they were arrested immediately.” This had not been made public for obvious reasons, and the trials were not scheduled until the Fall, the offenders having been thrown into Azkaban for the time being. The Wizengamot had neither been told about this, or checked themselves, the ones who weren’t Ministry officials anyway. So the traitors still sitting on the body, if one wants to call them that, were still in place for the future. They wouldn’t have much help though, at least not from within.

“I didn’t know that, but I’m glad that steps have been taken.” He was very relieved actually, more to the idea that his Rufus/Travis alliance was with people who were on the ball.

“We are a lot more thorough than we used to be, or than we were allowed to be. Still, all the blame can’t be laid on Fudge and Bagnold. We were at ‘peace’ for quite a long time, it made some of us

complacent.” Harry wondered if she really believed that, after all, Fudge was a very convenient scapegoat.

“Better late than never. What’s the prognosis for Lucius?” Travis handled that one.

“I got a floo call about that right before you got here, the medi-witch in charge of his case said that he’s going to be out of it for awhile. He has four different skull fractures, and possibly some brain damage, they’re not sure. He also lost a lot of blood, I doubt he’ll be conscious before the end of the month.”

“Why did they just leave him?”

“He had no further value to them. His wife and son defected, his brothers-in-law were killed, his intelligence and financial networks were largely rolled up. Remember, the Death Eaters are all replaceable parts to Voldemort, there is a downside to all the mayhem he allows them.”

“Is that why we’ll win? Because we care more about our own people?” Bones badly wanted to believe that, but didn’t let Harry see her ambivalence.

“Yes Harry, that’s one reason.”

The conversation died down soon after, and Harry and Travis went back to their dueling. The practice dueling wasn’t one long scrimmage mind you, it was more along the lines of drills and refinement of technique. Travis, with the inspiration of a wife who was a professional athlete, was in very good shape, and had the physical and magical endurance necessary to keep up with Harry. He taught Harry a lot he didn’t know about shields, and about how to enter a room carefully and to minimize danger. Harry also learned some cute scanning tricks that he hadn’t known, including a long-range scan that would detect magical persons at a distance of up to 800 meters. In return, Harry loaned the older man a few of his Black Library books, and Biller was suitably appalled at some of the curses he read about.....and he did read about them, he could be found engrossed

with them during his lunch hour and at other times. He might have even tried some, in the privacy of the building's firing range.

There was no word from Edward Grant or Alan Brandon for the rest of the month. Castor Archer had been wounded in the Riddle Manor attack and went to ground deep in rural Wales.....less than 30 kilometers from Godric's Hollow, not that he could have seen it. Grant and Brandon did, however, deal with Lawrence Granger, no relation, and what remained of his body would never be found. The pair of them reserved plane tickets for America come August, just in case, but they wanted to see how things shook out in Britain first. They were fully aware that they had three options: Join another werewolf/Lycan army somewhere else in the world; Make some kind of deal with the British Ministry; Sit out the entire thing and live normal lives, well as normal as they could being werewolves and all. They had access to the money stash that Greyback had built up, so they had options.

For his part, Voldemort and his substantially reduced crew settled on an Unplottable island in The Orkneys, tails somewhat between their legs. After some rudimentary questions, the bad man came to the correct conclusion that Granger, no relation, had been the one to betray them. There was no way to check for the Listening Charms that he had placed, which saved the lives of Bella and Wormtail to be sure, so Voldemort just assumed that Granger had been very careful in his planning and execution.

No, he didn't know that Greyback had ferreted out, no pun intended, the fact that there was a traitor in his pack. It was all the same really, and he was very amused to read about Greyback's death and the manner of it's discovery. The Death Eaters stepped up their attacks on Britain's squib population, and by the end of the month the campaign had thinned the squibs by over 40 percent. The bad man made no plans against the magical population for the time being, waiting to see if his replacements for the Lestrage brothers could pass muster.

And he was waiting for Harry to go back to Michigan, no point in forcing things that shouldn't be forced. Besides, he had heard rumors that Harry and Dumbledore were to be meeting before the month was

finished, there was a decent chance that a civil war could erupt on their side without him having to lift a finger. He could always hope couldn't he?

Saturday, July 20, 1997

4:00 pm

The Hollow

Remus and Tonks came through the front door, hanging on to Alicia as they did, as Harry had refused to inoculate them against The Pink. The Pink in fact worked both ways, something that had never been tested as yet.....which meant that just because someone got inside without being nailed, didn't mean they were getting out without help. So Remus and Tonks were in fact, trapped. Which they may or may not have realized at the time. Harry kept the Pink cocktail a trade secret, only he, the twins, Reiko, and Sophie knew it.....and Neville and Luna too. Only Joe Clancy had ever breached The Pink with ill intent though, with Ron and Harry doing the field testing, as it were.

Harry heard the door open and walked up to greet them, he had been home for only 30 minutes himself.

"Well here you are, welcome again. Wotcher Tonks." He loved saying that, though Sophie had threatened mayhem if he ever said 'Wotcher Sophie' where she could hear him.

"Wotcher Harry."

"Hello Harry, what's that smell?" He was still sniffing as he said it.

"Winky's making cookies. Oatmeal chocolate chip raisin cookies, and the smell is making me want to die too.....in a good way." Reiko came up behind him.

"Every couple of weeks Winky goes on a cookie making binge, and today is one of those days, we all look forward to them. Hey Remus,

Tonks.” She slapped Harry lightly on the back of the head as she led the visitors to the living room. Tonks started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“The smallest person in the house just smacked The Boy Who Lived, and he didn’t do a thing about it.” Harry just smirked at her.

“Eh, I don’t mind it. It’s not like she can reach Warrick’s head if he’s standing up, not without a stepladder anyway.” Reiko was still in earshot, but didn’t respond to the verbal slap on the back of the head.

“So you’re the substitute.”

“I have my uses.” Harry and Reiko spent a lot of time together, and more than any other woman in his life, he looked at her as the sister he had never been allowed to have, even more so than Hermione. Otherwise he never would have put up with the head slapping.

Remus had a thought or two, despite whatever desire he had to go to town on Winky’s cookies.

“Harry, I think we should talk now, rather than after dinner.”

“You’d just as soon get it over with I take it?”

“Yes I would. I know you have a lot of questions, and want some explanations, and I think we should just do it now.” Harry was all for it, but wanted to make sure that his erstwhile friend knew the whole deal upfront.

“You understand that you’ll be performing for the whole house right? I don’t see the need to waste time on a pensieve memory show.” Tonks for one loved how Harry was pressing his superior position.

Well, not really. But Remus was just grateful that it was kids only, and not the elder Weasleys, or even Rufus and Travis. It was one thing to know that the others would hear about what he had said, it was another to do it in front of them.

“I’m fine with it.”

“Let’s go into the living room then. You’ll need something to drink, as much as you’ll be talking, how about a Snapple? The twins and Hermione swear by it, and if you can get the three of them to agree on anything.....” Indeed the twins were contemplating on whether to sell the drink at the shop, as they were going through it by the case, it was all they ever drank anymore. They figured that by selling it they might get a better price than at the local grocers. The only trouble would be convincing the customers that the bottles weren’t a prank. They were still musing on that.

“That will be fine thanks.” Remus knew that the Veritaserum would be in it, and indeed Harry had chosen it just for that, since the consistency of the drug wouldn’t be as noticeable in juice. The screw-on top was gotten around by Harry pouring two bottles of Kiwi-Strawberry into one large glass. He did the same for Tonks, without drugs, and brought them into the living room. After Remus pointedly took a couple of big gulps, Harry got right to it, since the drugs would wear off more quickly than the limit of his questions. He would be the only questioner during the session, and Remus the only responder. Unlike the other Veritaserum-based discussions in our tiny little story, this was unique in that the one being interrogated was there willingly, and put forth more detailed answers than ‘yes’ or ‘no’. As a slight gesture to Remus, Harry somewhat theatrically gave his own wand to Warrick to hold on to.

“All right then, where to begin, where to begin. Did you have any role in the deaths of Lily and James?” That was direct, and Tonks looked to be about to object.

“No I did not.” Harry looked like he believed that, and pushed on, regardless of any dirty looks he was getting from Tonks.....not that he blamed her, but he had to do what he had to do.

“I was at Number 4 Privet Drive in Little Whinging for just shy of 10 years before I got my Hogwarts letters, all 1,000 of them. Why did you never come to visit me?” Harry did not exactly have a list in front

of him, but it would be fair to say that he had rehearsed this, even if it was just in his own mind.

“Petunia would not allow it.” That that woman had held such sway over his life for so long made Harry more than a little homicidal at times like these.

“And why did that stop you?”

“Her deal with Dumbledore was that no Wizard could cross that door unless the house was under attack, including Dumbledore himself. Dumbledore told me once that he disliked the arrangement, but he was resolute in sticking to it.”

“Were there wards up to test that deal?”

“I don’t know, but I assume that there were. That’s why Hagrid didn’t make contact until you four had left the house, again, in theory. I never asked him about it, and I doubt he would have told me if I had. No one in the world is more loyal to Dumbledore than Hagrid is.” The blind leading the blind, or so Harry thought.

“You said it was her deal with Dumbledore, why did that translate to you?”

“This is not what you want to hear Harry, but he convinced me that you were better off without any ‘taint’ of being The Boy Who Lived for as long as possible.”

“Why would I not want to hear that Remus?” He didn’t, but was interested in the man’s reaction.

“Because you don’t think it’s good enough.”

“I don’t.”

“And there is nothing I can do to change that Harry, it was years ago. Dumbledore was the leader of our community, whoever was Minister

of Magic at the time. When he told you something, you believed it, even if only because you had no choice. I know how that must sound to you right now, but none of us knew the entire picture at the time.” This was what Fred and George had warned Remus about, this type of explanation, but here he was giving it, and the twins were astonished that Harry was looking so calm about it.....as if he had expected no better and was moving on.

“Were you aware of Mrs. Figg?”

“Not by name, but Dumbledore said that there was someone watching you.” And there Harry’s temper flared unexpectedly, but dangerously.

“Watching me for what?! To see if an ambulance pulled up to take my dead body away!?” Remus flinched violently, valid though the question was, and Tonks was now very aware that she and Remus were dead people if Harry’s temper went beyond his control.

“I don’t know Harry, I don’t know what she was watching for. I didn’t know that your watcher was a squib until the Dementors incident two years ago.” Harry resumed his calm tone of voice, which scared Tonks even more than before.

“When did you first hear of his Dursley plan?”

“A week after James and Lily were killed.”

“After I had been put there.” After the fact.

“Yes.”

“Why did it take you a week to inquire about where I might be?”

“I was out of the country at the time. I had been sent on a mission by The Order to Ireland, to hunt down any Death Eaters that might have fled there. This was before Sirius was thrown into Azkaban, I just assumed that you would be safe with him, so I didn’t think

about it much.” The things you didn’t think about, raged Harry in his mind, but outwardly he kept his calm.

“Once you found out where I was, did you ever entertain the notion of going to Little Whinging and getting me out of there?”

“Yes, many times.”

“When was the first?”

“The day Dumbledore told me that you had been sent to Petunia.”

“What stopped you?” Remus’ answer nearly gave Harry a stroke.

“Dumbledore implied that I was still under suspicion for the murders. Sirius had been arrested, and I was his closest living friend. James was dead, and Peter was thought to be. I was the only one left who could have reasonably helped Sirius.”

Harry couldn’t speak for a minute, wasting precious seconds of his Veritaserum time. He recovered his voice and croaked out:

“Was he playing you? Or was there really suspicion?”

“There really was suspicion, though how much of it was fomented by Dumbledore is something you’ll have to discover for yourself next week. It was only logical if you think about it. One friend had turned on James and Lily, it would be a lot simpler for all involved if the other friend, who was seemingly not involved in any way, was in it too.”

“What did you do then?”

“I made arrangements to leave the country for a time, so it could all blow over. I lived in Ireland for a couple of years, then France, I speak French pretty well. I slipped back into Britain after about five years and it did seem to have died down, or at least no one mentioned it overtly. I did think about taking you from those people, but I was not equipped to raise a child, financially or emotionally. What I would

have done with you during the full moons would have been problematic.”

“And Dumbledore supported you?”

“If you mean financially, yes. He gave me a bank vault in Paris that contained the equivalent of 4,000 galleons a year. I wasn’t rich, but I could survive. I didn’t have any outside money, I wasn’t in James and Lily’s will, but then again Sirius and Peter weren’t either, as of your birth. A lot of your wealth in that vault came from years of compounding interest. The Potters were not an overly wealthy family, and James hadn’t had much time to rack up Quidditch money.”

“When you came back I would have been six years old, you still kept to Dumbledore’s deal?”

“Yes, and I have regretted that every day since I heard about how Vernon and Petunia raised you.”

“So you never tried?” Harry just couldn’t let that go.

“No I didn’t, I never crossed the city limits of Little Whinging. I would ask about you whenever Dumbledore and I met in person, but he always fobbed me off. I never dreamed that he would let them treat you like that for so long.”

“Why not a letter to Hogwarts during my first two years?”

“I sent you a dozen letters, I learned later that they never got through. Dumbledore was monitoring your mail.” This surprised none of the Hogwarts people in the slightest, though the Americans collectively looked appalled. Harry simply filed this information away for later, as he didn’t want the clock to run out on the drugs.

“You spent an entire year teaching me, why did you not fess up until the end that you had been friends with them?”

“I couldn’t Harry, because then we might have had this conversation then, when the rest of your knowledge about your past life would have been non-existent. I couldn’t do that to you, I felt that I had to wait for Dumbledore to fill in the gaps. I had delayed so long that I had no other choice but to follow Dumbledore’s lead.”

“What gaps?” Though he could guess.

“The Prophecy. I didn’t know what it was at the time, I just knew that Voldemort targeted Lily and James for a reason. No one knew it was you that was the target Harry, at least not until the aftermath, and for a lot of folks not even then. There was a lot of wild talk, and The Daily Prophet certainly didn’t help matters. McCrae wanted to sell papers, and it worked.” Harry had never met Augustus McCrae directly, though the man was a member of The League, but the man was moving higher and higher on Harry’s shit list all the time.

“That’s it?”

“And the Blood Protections too, that was some of it. You were perfectly safe at Privet Drive, and over the years more and more of us begged Dumbledore to coerce Vernon and Petunia into at least lightening up on you, but he refused. He said it was pushing things as they were, ordering the two of them to take you in. He said he would only intervene if that ambulance you spoke of showed up, and only then.” Harry’s voice was barely audible to his audience.

“I’m going to murder that man.”

“He’s assuming the same thing Harry, so be careful.”

“I’m always careful when I’m dealing with that person. So you gave into what he wanted?”

“I had no choice. Even if I had wanted to press the matter, I would have had no allies within our community, except, perhaps, Molly and Arthur, and that was only after they got to know you five years ago.”

“Why perhaps?”

“Because they believed in him just as much as everyone else, but they love you too, and if an incident had happened they might have been forced to choose up sides.....like they did last summer when you forced the issue.”

“Only when I acted were you people willing to do the same.” Harry had said much the same to Arthur at Christmas. Remus nodded.

“Yes.”

Harry ticked off some points on his fingers, though he was extra friendly in his tone of voice.....which still scared the crap out of Tonks and didn't make Hermione feel better either, though she was just as furious at Dumbledore as the rest of them. Our Hermione spent about half the conversation praying that Harry wouldn't go off half-cocked on Remus, and a tiny bit of the conversation hoping that he would, after hearing a few of the older man's answers. She and Ron would have plenty to talk about that night in bed, whether they did the wild thing or not.

“So Dumbledore allows Sirius to spend 12 years in Azkaban, lets you think you're a suspect in the murders, leaves me to rot in Dursley-ville for far too long. And he's still alive and kicking. Do you have any plans to do something about this Remus? Or must I be the one to act yet again?” The Veritserum was still going strong, and Remus had no choice but to answer.....as everyone leaned forward in anticipation.

“I will deal with Dumbledore as soon as you kill Voldemort, not before.” In point of fact Harry fully agreed with this plan, Remus didn't have to say another word.....but Harry knew that the audience, none of whom were as fully invested in this as the two of them were, would beat the crap out of him if he didn't have the man elaborate.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, I can’t know until the dust settles and we see the new order of things. Then you and I will pay the man a visit and take our revenge for Sirius, for your childhood. That’s been my thought for the last two years, every day. My only hope is that Dumbledore survives the war to answer to us, but in the meantime we need his help and power to fight our war.”

“And you believe that I’ll kill Voldemort?” The older man did not hesitate a whit.

“Yes I do, I always have.”

“And you have what it takes inside to take out Dumbledore? Or at least to help me do it. I’m not saying that you lack the magical ability, I know you have that. Do you have the moral fiber to do what’s right here Remus?” The older man didn’t take this in the spirit in which it was being offered, and was a little offended, though his tone of voice was still neutral via the drugs.

“I don’t have your familiarity with killing Harry, but I have done the deed before.” A faintly cruel smile flashed on Harry’s face.

“I don’t kill for pleasure Remus, but if someone aims a wand at me, they get it in spades. I am nothing more than a product of my environment and my upbringing. You’re aware of my reputation now?” The one he had been assiduously massaging for the last year or so.

“Isn’t everyone? You’ve cultivated it well, it got you an alliance with The Minister and his Head Auror, it has most of our community afraid to say boo to you for fear you’ll send them 50 Howlers via your customers.” Everyone started chuckling at hearing that, even Tonks smiled.

“It’s like my man Bodhi said: Project strength to avoid conflict.” That was Bohdi from Point Break, and the gang had had to endure a week of Harry going around quoting it back in November. Remus had never seen a muggle movie and had no interest in hearing about them now, so he moved on.

“The drugs are going to be wearing off, what else do you want to know?” Harry didn’t want to ask this, but felt that he owed it to Travis and Bones.

“Do you know who killed Fenrir Greyback?”

“No I don’t, not for sure.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I have my suspicions, but I don’t know.”

“What are your suspicions?”

“A man named Edward Grant, he was rumored to be Greyback’s number two. He’s an Irishman and I’ve heard that he’s magical, but no one knows for sure. He was Draco’s heroin dealer.” Harry hadn’t heard the name before, Rufus had left that detail out when talking to him about Draco back in February, though not on purpose.

“Are you glad that he’s dead?”

“More than I can say Harry, more than I can say.”

“Let’s get back to Sirius for moment, if you don’t mind. Did you ever ask the old man why he allowed Sirius to rot in prison for 12 years without trial? Surely the Head of the Wizengamot has some investigative powers.”

“I did ask him, and he truly believed that Sirius was guilty of the murders, well of allowing Voldemort access to Lily and James anyway. I guess the technical term would be ‘conspiracy to commit murder’ or something like that. The ruse really did work, at least that’s what he claimed to me at the time, he honestly thought that Sirius was the secret keeper and that he had murdered Peter and those muggles. He never wavered from that story, and I stopped bringing it up until Sirius came back.”

“Yet he was awfully eager to believe Hermione and I when we told him the Shrieking Shack story.” Hermione herself immediately started nodding in agreement.

“Maybe doubts were hitting him, I don’t know, he wouldn’t tell me what he was thinking. He might have told McGonagall or Flitwick, but I wasn’t in his inner circle then, I was just a rookie Defense teacher who was a last resort hire.” All too believable.

“Did you believe that Sirius was guilty all those years?” Remus sighed, it wasn’t quite that simple.

“Sometimes I did, sometimes I didn’t. There were times that I thought that maybe he and James had had a private falling out at the last moment. I never thought that Padfoot had been working for Voldemort for years like Peter was. That said, I must admit to you that I never thought that Peter was in on it. He was my friend, one of my closest friends to be sure, but I never saw the signs until they hit me in hindsight. I will regret that until the day I die, that I did not see it sooner. I don’t know Harry, I could have done something to stop it all, and we all would not be sitting here.”

Harry spotted Hermione in the corner of his eye, and decided to have a little fun with the time they had left. The seriousness of the talk was weighing on them, and Harry was unwilling to make Remus go through much more of it. A month ago he would never have thought he could be so compassionate, but there you go. That’s why they play the games.

“Who would win a duel between Ron and Hermione?” Ron cracked up, while Hermione just put her face in her hands to hide her own smile.

“Hermione, unless Ron got the drop on her even by a little.”

“Who would win between you and Tonks?”

“I would.” Everyone stared at Tonks, who just smiled and shrugged. After all, he was just being asked his opinion, the Veritaserum only dealt with facts, or what the person believed was a fact.

Harry checked his watch, and the drugs were about to wear off. He then side wheeled back into a serious question.

“Before coming into this house today, did you believe that your life was in danger?”

“Yes I did.” Harry knew he should be offended, but strangely he wasn’t.

“Then either I didn’t ask the right questions to bring out any guilt you might have, or you’re even more paranoid than I am.....though we both have good cause to be.”

“It’s the latter.” Remus’ voice was returning to normal, and the drugs had now worn off. According to Travis, the amount of Veritaserum Harry had used could be repeated every eight hours or so, meaning that they were done for the night with the drugs.....unless Harry wanted to hold Remus and Tonks prisoner, and he didn’t.

“Would you like some more Snapple? The secret ingredient won’t be in it this time.” The air was let out of the room, and everyone seemed more at ease.....no one more so than Remus. He had known all along that had done nothing truly criminal, but he hadn’t been sure how Harry would take the reasons for his Dursley non-action.

“Yes I would thanks, it was pretty tasty.” Hermione motioned for Harry to sit down as she went to the kitchen to get it. Harry mouthed thanks to her, and turned back to Remus.

“So, you’re still alive, imagine that.”

“Yes I am, I apologize for thinking that I might not be.”

“If you really had done something that heinous, you never would have agreed to come here. You would have delayed and delayed, and taken your chances with The Ministry.” Remus started chuckling.

“When did you figure that out?”

“As soon as you set foot in the door. After the cancellation last week I had my doubts.” Indeed Sophie and Warrick had to talk Harry out of going out and fetching Remus. They made him promise to give Remus another week, and Harry had reluctantly agreed.....even though he had told Remus that he had even more time than that, as long as it took place before the wedding.

“I didn’t want to be alone here.”

“Well you’re not alone, there are almost 20 people in the room.” His old teacher gave him a ‘please don’t treat me like an idiot look’, as Hermione handed him another glass of Snapple.

“You know what I mean Harry.”

“Yes I do Remus, and do you really think that Tonks would have stopped me from harming you if that’s what I was really after?” And there went the good feeling in the room, at least for a few seconds. Tonks made a move to stand up, presumably to stalk out, but Remus waved his hand at her to stop.

“Not in the least, and I was not referring to that. I simply wanted the moral support that she provides, and let me tell you Harry, it helped.” Harry then decided to lay another guilt trip, just to remind Remus that while all was forgiven.....sort of.....

“You left me to rot in that house Remus.”

“How many times do I have to apologize for that Harry?”

“More than you have so far, but you’re in luck.” Oh really?

“Why is that?”

“Because there is bigger game out there, and I can’t afford to lose focus on it.”

“Who is the bigger game? Voldemort? Dumbledore?”

“Those two, and Wormtail as well. You have a vested interest in all three, just like I do.”

“So you’re keeping me alive because you need me as a soldier?”

“Oh please, the only way you would have been killed tonight is if you had admitted to helping with Mum’s and Dad’s deaths, and even then I probably would have thought twice about it.”

“Why am I not comforted by that?”

“Because you have a guilty conscience, that’s why. You took the easy way out, you abandoned your friends’ son. I understand that you felt your reasons were justified at the time, so I forgive you.” That was so abrupt that Remus nearly fell out of his chair.

“Oh.....well, thank you for that.” That didn’t last long, though Harry was half smiling when he lobbed his next verbal grenade.

“I hope Mum and Dad torture the crap out of you in the afterlife though, you abandoned their son.”

“I wouldn’t blame them if they did.”

“Well Peter is going straight to Hell, so they won’t get a chance to do anything with him.”

“Do you have any special plans for him?”

“Oh I’m going to make it last at least a week. No, the DMLE won’t be getting it’s hands on Wormtail if I have anything to say about it.”

That sounded very cold to an uninitiated listener, but Sophie and most of the others didn't really take it seriously. They all, save Fred and George, felt that Harry would want Pettigrew on trial, so as to posthumously exonerate Sirius, which hadn't happened yet. Why Harry had not asked this of Rufus was rather unclear, perhaps he was just waiting for another favor request from The Minister. If he had only known that Rufus didn't care on way or the other, since pardoning Black would do nothing but make slight changes to the history books. Perhaps Harry thought that as well.

"May I ask you some questions? Before we get to Lily and James that is." Harry was no hypocrite, and he knew where this was going.

"Sure."

"How comfortable are you getting into bed with Rufus Scrimgeour?" There's a shocker.

"I have no interest in seeing Rufus naked, trust me on that." Remus was straitlaced enough to be embarrassed by that.

"That is NOT what I meant Harry."

"Well try not to use metaphors like that, they'll get you into trouble you know." Remus just shook his head, as even Tonks was chuckling.

"Duly noted."

"And would someone please tell me what is wrong with being friendly with The Minister? I've gotten it from you, Arthur, even the twins here. He's a great guy who's good at his job."

"You don't get to be Minister of Magic without knowing how to manipulate people Harry, and Rufus Scrimgreour has done a remarkable job of remaking the Ministry in his own image, in less than a year to boot." That did not especially satisfy our young Harry.

"I'm still waiting for you to tell me the downside to all of this."

“Are you truly certain of his intentions?”

“Well right now I know that his intentions are limiting the scope of Dumbledore’s power, destroying the Death Eaters, and taking down Voldemort, all good things as far as I’m concerned.....beyond that, I don’t care what he wants to do. If he helps me, and me him, with those three tasks, he can rename Diagon Alley to Rufusville for all I care.”

The group pondered the possibilities of ‘Rufusville’ for a moment, it was an interesting conceptual idea.

“So you don’t mind that he’s consolidated power like he has?”

“I hate to remind you of this Remus, but I don’t live in Britain for most of the year. I’m not old enough to vote, and I have no political position with which to stop him even if I wanted to, and I don’t want to. There are enough checks and balances in our system to prevent him from becoming a dictator, you people just rolled over for Fudge for so long that you’re not used to a Minister who’s actually fairly dynamic.”

“If you say so.”

“Oh please, all you have is a bad feeling in your stomach or colon or something. Maybe the Snapple and the Veritaserum didn’t mix right. Come back to me when Rufus actually does something suspicious or heinous.” Remus saw that he would get nowhere with his argument, and it wasn’t even an argument really, he just wanted to make sure that Harry at least sort of understood what he was doing. It was heady stuff, a 16 year old kid fully allied with a Minister of Magic, and the werewolf was worried that his young friend might be a little in over his head.

“ Okay, now what would you like to know about your parents.....beyond ‘everything’”

“Tell me about the first day you met them, the first day of school.” Remus pondered that for a tick:

“ Actually, I met them on the train, like you and Ron and Hermione.....and Neville too, if I remember the story correctly, the toad named Trevor. This was when they had teachers on the train every year, and they tried to herd the first years into compartments together, so we could all get to know each other. The Slytherin legacies all wound up together, including Snape, but I got a compartment with James and Sirius. Peter was with Pep and Luke, and a couple of others that wound up in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.” Pep was E-gang tutor Mike Peplowski, and Luke was Maurice Lucas, who now ran an import company out of Aberdeen, mostly muggle in nature. Mostly. Mostly legal in nature. Mostly.

The train ride was spent speculating on what House they would get put in, the Potters had always been Gryffindors, the Blacks always Slytherins, while the Lupins had been a mixture of all four. They had done some wandering up and down the train corridors, but the teachers were there to prevent any upperclassman style harassment. There were Draco Malfoy types on the train then, but they were not allowed free reign.

He then described the first couple days at school, and in their dorm room, the six of them, only Sirius and James knowing each other from before. It wasn't that different from Harry and company's first days, except that there was no Boy Who Lived dynamic mucking things up. Remus didn't meet Lily, beyond knowing her name and what she looked like, until a couple of days later, when they were paired in Potions. He described a wide-eyed young girl, using her wand whenever she could, hardly able to believe that all of this was possible. Sophie, Claudia, and Hermione could all relate to that feeling in spades, being muggleborn.....and Harry too, he might as well have been muggleborn.

“No, I didn't have a thing for her then Harry, I was 11 years old and not really into girls at that point.”

“So my Mum wasn't good enough for you eh?” Warrick was howling, as was Drew, they had both gotten that kind of grinning question from

Harry about Sophie. They thought it was nice to see someone over her subjected to it.

“Don’t start. Besides, she couldn’t stand James and Sirius, who most certainly were into girls at that age, and I was guilty by association in some respects.”

“Oh boy.”

“Oh they were gentlemen when they had to be, but they liked teasing her.”

“And how did she react?”

“She said that she didn’t mind as long as they didn’t touch her, otherwise she would use a Slicing Charm that she had read about.” Every male in the room gulped, while every female grinned.

“Was Dad her first boyfriend?” Travis hadn’t known the answer to this one, and it turned out that Remus didn’t either.

“Well, more or less. There were Yule Balls that she went to with other guys, but I think James was the first person she went ‘steady’ with, if you will.”

“You think? You don’t know for sure?” Remus just shrugged.

“Well what constitutes a boyfriend Harry? More than one date? A public display of affection in the Common Room? It’s a fine line you know, even back in the 70’s. I know that James was the first one she dated inside Gryffindor, they were all Hufflepuffs before him.” There were no Hufflepuffs in the DOM’s or the Rogue DA of course, and Ron in particular still liked called them ‘duffers’.

“What about Dad?”

“His first girlfriend was Kendra Shepherd, that’s Charles’ older sister, they were in Third Year and very serious, at least serious for being 13

years old. A very rare Gryffindor/Slytherin romance, it wasn't really encouraged." There were currently none at Hogwarts now either, at least none that were overt.

"Whatever happened to her?"

"At the time? It lasted Third Year and some of Fourth, they broke up on the night of the Yule Ball. James and Lily were becoming better friends, and Kendra wasn't too keen on that idea. She suspected, correctly, that James had his eye on Lily for more than friendship, and they had a somewhat civil argument and broke up, after the dance that is."

"Amicable?"

"Oh sure, though they weren't really friends afterward. They weren't enemies or anything, she couldn't stand Snape for example, and James made a point of having us leave her alone whenever we pranked Slytherin. She took up with some Slytherin a couple of years older than she was and she married him right after graduation, for the life of me I can never remember his name. She works for Witch Weekly now doing something I'm not clear on." The Shepherd family owned Witch Weekly.

"Wow, my Dad with a Slytherin."

"She was really pretty, and the Shepherds weren't Death Eater tainted, they're more like your American style Dark Wizards, more concerned with money than anything. Sirius, Peter, and I all got along very well with her, there were no issues there."

"Then why does Charles Shepherd put up with Dumbledore and all that work teaching if he's so rich?"

"I don't know beyond that he says that he just likes teaching. He only took it as a favor to Dumbledore, the old man did something for Charles' father or something, I'm not too clear on it. He's a good guy, he, Professor Hill, and I have become friends" The unholy trinity, according to McGonagall, with Sinistra as their female member.

“So there was just Kendra and Mum?”

“Pretty much, though James and Lily took some time to get going. He had to woo her a little bit, show her that he wasn’t the prat he often came across as. That took some time, almost a year really, before they started to get serious with each other. He made a point not to date anyone in the interim, to prove to Lily that he was worthy of her.”

“But he wasn’t a dick right? Like Snape?” That pensieve memory was always in the back of Harry’s mind at times like these.

“No, he was nothing like Snape, except in that they were both smart. Don’t let that idiot’s pensieve memory throw you. No, he was just always trying to be funny and the life of the party, whether there was a party going on or not. McGonagall hated that I don’t mind telling you. Thinking back on it, I can see why you gravitated toward Fred and George as you got older, they’re more like James than Ron or Neville are.....no offense guys.” For a second there he had forgotten about his larger audience. Neville and Ron both shrugged, Ron having mostly gotten past all of that.

“None taken.”

“Of course not.”

Actually Ron was more like Peter Pettigrew than Remus was willing to admit, in a non-drugged state anyway, while Neville reminded him of himself. None of Harry’s male friends reminded him of Sirius, though whether that was Padfoot being one of a kind or it just being a coincidence was open to question.

He then indulged them and told a couple of Snape stories, and all of the Brits got a better appreciation for the talents of their former professor.....talents in manipulation, both subtle and overt.

“Sirius knew him best of course, the Blacks and the Snapes were old family friends.”

“So Snape and Sirius were friends going in?”

“Eh, not really. That’s the thing about the phrase ‘family friends’, sometimes it doesn’t mean friends at all. Sirius and Snape were thrown together a lot, but their personalities were not really too compatible. They had learned how to tolerate each other sufficiently, let’s put it that way.”

“How did his parents take the fact that Sirius got put into Gryffindor.”

“Not that badly at first Hermione, they just figured that The Sorting Hat was playing a small prank or something. They didn’t realize that Sirius was more Gryffindor than anything else, though there was some Slytherin in there as well, just waiting to be let loose. That was the first attempt to disown him, after they belatedly figured this out.”

“The first attempt?”

“Sirius kept talking them out of it, he was very skilled at doing it too. He would say that all four of us were Slytherins at heart really, and that sometimes it was better to be in the enemy camp in disguise and bullshit like that. He wasn’t the movie fan that you lot appear to be, no VCR’s back then of course, but he had that way of talking. His parents weren’t quite convinced, but he did enough muggleborn bashing to get away with it.”

“I’m sure that went over big with Mum.”

“No it didn’t, but Sirius went out of his way to let her know that it was an act. He had nothing against the muggleborns really, it’s not like it’s their fault that they’re magical. Being magical is something you’re born with, it’s like being born tall. You either are, or you’re not, and while you can choose not to use those gifts, you’re kind of silly to reject them.”

“ My lucky uncle, born both magical and tall.” That would be Warrick’s Uncle Antonio, who had promised his parents that he would never cast a spell on a basketball.

“We’re not quite one in a million, but one in 6,000 still works pretty nicely. Things were changing at Hogwarts during our time, the Slytherins were making more and more inroads into normal society, but on their terms.”

“Is that when Snape began his ‘seduction’ of Dumbledore?”

“I’m glad you put the emphasis on seduction when you said that Harry.....”

“I know, I know, bad mental images.”

“I’m going to be carrying that around with me all night thank you. No, Snape and Dumbledore were merely allies of expediency for the most part, though Snape was in that office a lot.”

“You saw via The Map?”

“And a few Listening Charms we had set up by Dumbledore’s office in the corridor. Especially the last couple of years we tried to keep tabs on Snape and what he was up to. Everyone assumed that he was Voldemort’s man inside Hogwarts, but we wanted proof. Which we never got obviously, otherwise Snape would have been arrested. McLaws may not have been the most diligent Minister when it came to rounding up Death Eaters, but if it was obvious he would act.” Remus said that with no small amount of irony.

“You never caught Snape at anything?”

“No, Snape was way too careful, he only recruited within Slytherin, and they were a pretty tight unit for the most part. Even Kendra and her friends would turn a blind eye to most things, though they would never join in. Now according to Dumbledore, Snape’s conversion didn’t happen until he had left Hogwarts, so whether you believe he genuinely turned or not, and I don’t, he was totally a Death Eater in training while he was in Hogwarts. I’m told that he got the Dark Mark the day after he graduated.”

“You never believed he turned?”

“No, and your next question will be: ‘But Remus, he prepared your Wolfsbane for almost a year.’”

“It did cross my mind.”

“Well remember, there was no war on then, and Voldemort was still stuck in Albania, once you released him from the back of Quirrel’s head anyway. The Death Eaters were very far underground, and Snape probably just didn’t think it was worth it to poison me. He had a sweet deal at Hogwarts, total freedom within his House, and total freedom to deal with the students the way he wanted to. The only condition he had to deal with is that he couldn’t fail you, you were guaranteed to pass Potions no matter what?” A few jaws dropped, and Harry was now regretting all the hard work he had put into the class.

“Why was that?”

“Because Dumbledore wouldn’t let him, that’s why. It was the only concession he would make toward diffusing Snape’s bias against you. He wanted the lid kept firmly on, and for you to keep passing through the years at school. It would have looked bad if The Boy Who Lived had flunked out of Hogwarts, and the Board of Governors would surely have launched some sort of investigation. Now he didn’t want your grades to be too good, as he didn’t want you to become an Auror.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know Harry, and I realized that I’m say ‘I don’t know’ more than I should here. Well actually I do know, now that I think about it, but it was a bit dodgy at the time.”

“What did he want for my future then? He’s not going to get it mind you, but what did he want?”

“His idea was for you to break the Defense jinx. You were slated to become the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher come next year, that was the plan from the outset.” Harry took a few seconds to find his voice, and it took a couple of gulps of his Dr. Pepper to grease the way.

“Excuse me?”

“You were going to teach Defense and be close by so that he could keep an eye on you, just in case Voldemort returned and you were needed to deal with him. It was unclear when that would happen, but Dumbledore was convinced it would happen eventually. He just didn’t count on Bertha Jorkins and a trip to Albania accelerating the process, I know he was hoping that you could graduate first.”

“So you in our Third Year were only supposed to be there the year? I thought Snape ‘outing’ you was the big reason why you left?”

“It didn’t help, but I was slated to resign later in the summer anyway. Moody was not a last minute substitution, he was always going to be your Defense teacher that year.”

“So he wanted the jinx to continue?”

“Yes, it was all a prelude to you taking the job, though the jinx had gone on much longer than his plan for you, he just extended it. Now he didn’t count on some of the teachers he hired to be so bad. Gilderoy actually had him somewhat fooled by his media clippings, and I think Dumbledore liked the idea of having you see that being famous actually was kind of a pain. Quirrel was meant to be a nice way to break you into Defense, while the real Moody would have helped you just as much as the fake one did.” He paused to take a sip of juice, and Harry jumped right in.

“What about Umbridge? Please tell me that he didn’t plan on her.”

“No he didn’t, he didn’t factor in that no one would want the job, and I mean no one. Every Auror turned it down, and Tonks here, Hestia Jones, Kingsley Shacklebolt, were all needed for Order duties, and to

be inside Auror Command if Fudge ever did anything rash.” Kingsley had been increasingly marginalized at Auror Command over the last few months, as his staunch loyalty to Dumbledore did not sit well with Travis, who naturally thought that said loyalty should be to him and Rufus, and Bones as well. He was still in charge of a crew, but was far down the list as far as influence went, and was unlikely to be promoted under the current Ministry leadership.

“Yeah, but once it came down to her or removing one of them from Order duties, why didn’t he?” All the DOM’s leaned forward to hear this one, with no Umbridge, there would have been no Dumbledore’s Army.....a term that made Harry sick to his stomach whenever he thought of it.

“Harry, we never dreamed Umbridge would behave like she did, or that Fudge would take his witch hunt as far as he did. By the time we wised up, it was too late and all we could do was damage control.”

“She wasn’t like that at The Ministry?”

“No, and I don’t even think Fudge knew what she was capable of. In the end, he was simply trapped in a corner by what she had done, and could do little but try and ride out the storm along with the rest of us.” Harry threw something out, just to see how Remus and Tonks would react.

“She screams his name in Azkaban.”

Tonks looked a bit revolted, while her ‘boyfriend’ didn’t look the least bit surprised. Neither of them knew the truth of Fudge’s exile, and it would stay that way.

“Let’s get back to me teaching Defense at Hogwarts.....which isn’t happening by the way. When did he abandon this plan?”

“He hasn’t.” Harry had been afraid of hearing that.

“Ever the optimist.”

“Yes he is.”

“How do you know he’s still sticking with his scheme? I’m sure he must realize that your loyalties are torn.”

“That doesn’t matter to him as much as you seem to think, he sees me as a keeping a window of dialogue open to you. No, I don’t tell him anything about you, not that I know much anyway, since I can’t come over to the States, but he’s keeping at least one bridge intact with you, and I’m it.”

“So according to him, this coming year is your last.”

“Ideally yes, but he knows that you’ll play Quidditch for awhile first, which was another problem for him. You’ll notice that your seasons kept getting interrupted while you were there.....” That hadn’t occurred to Harry for a long time, but had to Reiko and Sophie upon hearing his stories, and they had given him his light bulb moment.

“That could have cost me quite a bit of money.”

“I doubt he cares about that.”

“Just out of curiosity, and feel free not to answer.....but how much do Hogwarts teachers make? How much would I be giving up if I were to take his idiotic deal?” Sprout had told Neville, who could have told Harry if he had brought it up before now, but he hadn’t.

“I am scheduled to make 11,000 galleons for a 10 month academic year. Free room and board are included, though I sleep in my own home most nights. How big a cut would that be?” He didn’t know what Quidditch players made. Everyone looked at Angelina, who had been horrified.

“A lot Remus, something around an 80 percent cut at the very least. Young Harry here will probably do better than Owen Hart did too, if he comes to play in our league.”

“Well I don’t do it for the money of course, and I doubt you would either.” Let’s not go that far, Harry was thinking, but he didn’t mention that.

“Well I won’t do it because it’s his grand plan, no.”

“You should tell him that at your meeting.”

“Oh I will, believe me. How did we get on this topic anyway?” It was not quite about Lily and James, though he was riveted by it anyway.

“You asked about Snape and it kind of evolved from there.”

“Oh right, let’s get back to Mum and Dad.”

Remus spoke for a little while about the Animagus work that his friends had done, and while he made it sound like a very fun lark, albeit with a lot of studying involved, Harry still had no interest in doing likewise. There were books about it in his Black Library, but they would remain untouched for the near future, as no one currently living in The Hollow was interested in trying to become an Animagus.

The Q&A lasted for three hours in total before Remus started getting a sore throat and Harry decided that he needed time to digest all of this. He had gotten what he wanted about Dumbledore and The Dursleys though, and figured he could always sneak back from Michigan if he had more to find out. Besides, he would be back at least one Saturday afternoon a month for League meetings, and he could always buttonhole Remus at those. Warrick had promised him that he would arrange Quidditch practice to happen after lunch in America, which would make it after dinner in Britain.....the defending champions in each sport had first dibs on practice time slots.

They all ate dinner, more Mexican this time, and Remus just sat and listened for the most part, though his mouth was constantly full of Winky’s cookies. Angelina had a game coming up the following week for the English National Team, a friendly at Mongolia, and she was very excited and nervous about it. This was the final friendly before

training camps opened for the BQA, and her final opportunity to solidify her spot for the World Cup team next year. The twins were coming along for the trip, another case of what might have been in a sense, they having played their last official game.

As Remus and Tonks were leaving, care package of cookies in hand for each of them, Harry walked them out to the front door, as was his wont with guests. Remus had one final topic to broach with him.

“Harry, are you going to meet with Draco while you’re here?”

“I’m not planning to, no. I’m busy enough with the tutoring, and generally having fun. Why?”

“I think you should Harry.”

“Yet again, I ask.....why?”

“Because it would be nice if you two could learn to be allies. He has a lot to offer our side, and it would help if our side’s best fighter were to at least pretend to tolerate him.”

“I do tolerate him, I could have killed him in Rufus’ office if I had wanted to, I doubt Rufus and Travis would have done more than pat me on the head and say ‘Please don’t do that again Harry’.” Remus had absolutely no trouble believing that.

“That’s hardly the same thing Harry.”

“It’s not? He pulled a lot of shit for a lot of time Remus, I reckon I’m not as forgiving to my enemies as you and Dumbledore are.”

“Don’t lump me in with Dumbledore Harry, I know that you mean it as an insult and I won’t have it.”

“Tough luck Remus. You just spent three hours talking with me about Mum and Dad and Dumbledore, which I am very grateful to you for by the way, and it would take a like amount of time to catalogue

the crap that Draco Malfoy has either pulled on me, or attempted to pull on me. Hey, I'm glad he flipped sides, if only to deny the other team a key player. I'm glad he got the money, since now Tom doesn't have access to it anymore. But as for my role with him? I promised not to kill him, and that's as far as I'm willing to go here."

"I can't convince you otherwise?" Sensing that Remus needed a bone thrown to him.

"Look, because of tonight I'll think about it. Let's see what happens with Dumbledore before I decide about much of anything." Remus could tell that he was being sloughed off, but he reckoned that it was better than an outright refusal.

"Fair enough. I have to take off for a few days, a teaching conference in Ireland, so I doubt that I'll see you before the wedding."

"That'll be a fun day, with or without Dumbledore."

"We can only hope. I like your new friends Harry, they're a good group, they've made quite a difference with you."

"How so?"

"They allow you to relax, they calm you down, since they aren't burdened with roles in our little drama over here."

"I sort of fell into most of them, since they were friends with Sophie. Only Drew and Marie are friends I made outside of them, in our gang anyway.....you'll meet Marie at the wedding, she's coming down the day before."

"I'm looking forward to it. Anyhow, good night Harry, thanks for dinner and the conversation."

"You're welcome, thanks for talking with me about the past, I know that most of it is painful for you."

“I should have done it a long time ago, or at the very least last summer. Your friend Biller was right to force me to do it, I can admit that. Just do me one favor though.”

“Name it.”

“When you and Sophie get married, make sure you do it here so I can attend.” All three of them laughed, as did Sophie, who was coming up behind them.

“If only that was up to me Remus. Goodnight you two, be good.”

“Goodnight Harry.”

“See ya Harry.”

Remus and Tonks didn't portkey out, they just walked to the edge of the wards and Apparated home. Sophie and Harry watched them stroll away, hand in hand for the first time in their viewing. Sophie slipped her arm around Harry's waist and queried him.

“So?”

“So?”

“That helped I'm guessing.”

“Yes it did darling. Between Remus, Pep, and Travis, I now have a somewhat comprehensive history on Mum and Dad. It took long enough, and a lot was given to me by two guys I didn't know existed a year ago, but it finally worked.”

“What about this Luke guy? Will you visit him?”

“No, Pep said that he's pretty hard to track down, always on the move and such.” He doubted that the man would have much to add.

“Probably best then. Only a week and a half left here, then it becomes the twins’ abode.” The twins and their ladies would be in residence after everyone left, while Lee was planning to take over the twins’ suite at WWW.

“We’ll come back for a few days around Christmas, we have to do a three Christmas dinners in one day again, that was special.”

“No bets this time.”

“Eh, we’ll see about that. It worked for Easter didn’t it?” The Jonas/Harry menu had been very well received.

“Yes it did, I have to admit that your food escapades are a lot of fun. C’mon, let’s go for a walk.”

“Just you and I on a walk, how will we stand the privacy?”

“We’ll manage honey, we’ll manage.” They shut the door behind them and went for a long walk, never leaving the Potter property.

On Monday, Ginny’s and Luna’s OWL scores arrived, along with grade reports for Ron, Hermione, and Neville. Ginny had wound up with O’s in Defense, Transfiguration, and Muggle Studies, with E’s in Arithmancy, Potions, Herbology, and Charms. These were the best OWL scores in the family since Percy, and third overall behind Percy and Bill. She was now the top Gryffindor in her year, and ranked fourth overall in her class behind two Ravenclaws and a Slytherin.

Tops in the year was Luna, rising from the third spot the year before, one can imagine that she had more time to study, not having to search for her things all the time. She had gotten O’s in Defense, Charms, Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Transfiguration, and Herbology. Only Potions and Muggle Studies were E’s for her, and they were high E’s at that. Neither Ginny nor Luna won a Governor’s Award for being best in the class in a subject, a Ravenclaw named Alexa DeMille had won the Defense award, which both Ginny and Luna had been gunning for. She was not in the Rogue DA, but her father was third in charge at Auror Command, which surely helped.

Hermione's grades stayed stellar, though she remained third behind Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot. She had dropped Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology, and the lighter class schedule had improved her already outstanding marks. Neville rose up to number eight in the class, a rise of two spots.....though one spot was because Harry was no longer there. Ron made the biggest leap of anyone in their class, going from number 30 to number 21, and none of the five were prouder of their marks than he was. It was a lot of ground to make up, five years of semi-laziness, but it boded very well for the future. Getting in the top half of the class was now only two slots away. NEWT's were only 11 months off, and Hermione was spending her free time making up charts and study schedules, much as she always did. Reiko talked with her about them, and thought it wasn't a bad idea to get some form of rough schedule going for the lot of them at Great Lakes. Their daily and nightly routines were very different, with no Prefect duties and less Quidditch practice for the American based students, but it was a sound idea in principle. Anyone who wanted an teaching career at one of the four schools needed top a top NEWT score in their subject area, whatever their performance wound up being at muggle university. Indeed John Ryan in Potions and Wash in Transfiguration had both skipped university, along with the Defense guys Greenleaf and Ripley.

Friday, July 26, 1997

King's Cross Station, London

5:30 pm

Harry, Sophie, and Drew were standing on Platform 12, waiting for the train that was just now coming into hearing range. Marie Ford was on the train, and Drew was looking more than a little nervous about it. Marie, from a wealthy family that owned muggle newspapers, had spent most of the month in France at a cousin's chateau, perfecting her already very-good French and generally taking it easy. She and Drew had been exchanging letters, via Winky, ever since school had ended, and it was pretty much agreed by all that Drew was seriously in 'like'. Harry got the rundown on everything that was going on in France very soon after Winky returned, and Drew was getting loads

of good advice from Ginny after the lights went out every night about how to deal with women and girls.

That's verbal advice thank you very much, friend to friend. The fact that she had never met Marie didn't matter, though that was going to change in a little while. Marie was going to be staying for the rest of the Godric's Hollow experience, which was due to end the following Thursday for what might be the portkey ride back to Michigan, or it might mean the trunk floo ride back to Oklahoma. A lot depended on the next few days and how Marie took to things, and things took to her. Harry was fully cognizant of how many people he was trusting lately.....but he really didn't see any Peter Pettigrews in the bunch, and believe me, he was watching for signs. Even with that, he couldn't point to one person who could even remotely be suspect by themselves. If anyone turned on him in the E-gang, it would have to be in a group of some kind.

"Calm down Drew, she's on the train isn't she." That was a statement, as Harry had surreptitiously had Winky make sure that Marie did in fact board the train from Paris to London. He had told Drew after the fact, and the look of relief on his friend's face was palpable.

"I know, I know. It's just weird, waiting at a foreign train station for my sort-of girlfriend."

"It'll be fine, I'm sure The Hollow or The Burrow won't freak her out too much. Probably."

"You're all heart Harry." But he was smiling, and Sophie put her arms around both of them.

"Don't listen to a word he says Drew, it's going to be great."

"I hope so." He figured it would be okay at least, Marie knew most of the people involved, and had only not met the DOM's, who were not being nearly as big a problem as Harry had led them to believe. Neville, Luna, and Ginny were always going to be alright, and Drew had found immediate kinship with Ginny, but he was surprised to find

that Ron and Hermione, despite a few altercations, were fitting in very well too. Drew and Ron had played another chess doubleheader the other night, with them splitting again, though this time Drew had waxed him in one game and barely lost the other.....there was the train, just coming into it's stopping point. Drew took something out of his pocket, enlarged it wandlessly, and kept it behind his back.

The passengers began to disembark, and Marie was one of the first off. She had been told via Winky who was meeting her, and thus who to try and spot. She saw the trio right away, and a wide smile hit her face as she came toward them. Drew moved toward her and gave her the object behind his back, which turned out to be a single rose.

“Welcome to Britain.” Marie, who it turned out was seriously in ‘like’ with Drew too, took the rose and her smile somehow got even bigger. She gave him a quick hug and kiss on the cheek as Harry and Sophie came up.

“It’s good to be here.” Harry and Sophie greeted her, and the two guys grabbed her bags. They were magical suitcases, charmed to be feather-light and hold four times what muggle suitcases could, so they did the job for a month abroad.

“Where are we going first?”

“We thought we’d give you a look at the shop, then on to The Hollow. The house isn’t on the floo system yet, if it ever will be, so we’ll have to portkey.” There was the trunk system, but they only used that when Ron and Hermione were nowhere around, something that made Harry feel a little guilty every time it happened.

The four of them took a muggle taxi to The Leaky Cauldron, or the area around it was what they told the cabbie, and Harry did the tapping on the bricks thing, which always gave him fond memories of Hagrid and his umbrella, as Harry fully remembered his wide-eyed, just turned 11 years old self looking at the half-giant do what he thought was the impossible. The entryways to the five Alleys in The United States were simply doors loaded with Muggle Repelling Charms, none of the charm of touching the bricks.

They meandered around Diagon Alley a bit, and promised Marie a visit to Knockturn in the future as well. Full daylight was still considered best for that, even if traveling in a pack. Diagon Alley was like a different era from Flackter Alley, though not too different, it's not as though the Milwaukee version was like Times Square or anything. She found it charming and said so, all the while wondering if Dark Wizards were about to attack them at any minute.

They got to the shop, and Marie became WWW's new best customer, insisting on buying just about one of everything to bring back to Cincinnati to show her family. She had been the occasional purchaser of pranks before, but nothing like this, the catalogues were nothing like actually being the shop and handling the merchandise. This would up the ante for Rachel Kessler back in Cortez House, who had previously worn that crown. She was competitive though, and that boded well for the business. Marie especially liked the Ventriloquist Sponges, and bought the store out. Why she did this was unknown, and she wasn't talking, though Harry and Drew were not done asking.

They took the portkey ride back to The Hollow, along with Lee and Claudia, who had been working the shop. There was usually no rehearsal dinner type event in Wizard marriages.....indeed there was no rehearsal period. It was a somewhat spontaneous affair, and if something flubbed up, it was just considered part of the charm of the event. The Weasleys and the Delacours would be coming over for dinner in about an hour, but that was more because The Hollow could fit everyone a lot better than The Burrow.

Marie loved the house, and Harry and Sophie left Drew to show her around. Her presence did necessitate a room change though, as Drew insisted on moving into Harry's trunk, with Marie taking his spot in the room with Ginny. Not that anyone complained, it would have been a little weird with those three people together.

It wasn't long before everyone else got there, most of the Delacour family had arrived from France earlier that day, though they had not taken the train with Marie, they had long arranged for portkeys. There were quite a few of them, some of whom were staying at The Burrow,

the rest of them at Bill and Fleur's apartment.....a cohabitation that had raised some hackles among Fleur's grandparents, resulting in a few Howlers. She had blithely ignored them though, and she and Bill had lived together since November. They would be staying in that apartment for the foreseeable future, or at least until any bun in the oven got taken out. Fleur was just 20 years old and in no hurry for that, while Bill was an old man at 29, a bit of a push and pull.

There were six of them in all here at The Hollow: Fleur's parents, Jean Claude and Eva, her sisters Laure, Gabrielle, and Dominique, and her cousin Petra. The sisters and Petra, along with Ginny, would be standing up for her at the ceremony. Other assorted grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and friends would be coming in the morning for the noon ceremony. Laure was the oldest sister, at 25, and had two children, including the one born in May, said baby and her husband were coming the next day, as babies were not harmed by portkey travel any more than children ten years their senior. Dominique was the young one at age 10, three years younger than Gabrielle, who was about to start her third year at Beauxbaton. Petra and Fleur had gone through Beauxbaton together, indeed Petra Delacour had been among the candidates for their school's representative to the Tri-Wizard Tournament before losing out to Madame Maxime's preferred choice, her cousin. Petra was just as beautiful as her cousin, there was Veela on her side of the family as well, and Drew, Warrick and Harry would spend a lot of time come Fall taunting Jonas about that fact.

At least 10 minutes was spent introducing everyone, as there were over 30 people in the house if one included Dobby and Winky, who had been cooking all day in preparation. Gabrielle made a point of being as near to Harry as she could, and told the story of how he had saved her in the lake to anyone that would listen. Warrick made her tell it twice, so he could memorize it, he wanted some ammunition for the future. Harry didn't mind the attention though, at least she had a crush for something that he actually had done on purpose, rather than the fame of his scar. Likewise he and Fleur had always shared something of a kinship, because of that one night back in the summer of 1995, and Fleur made a point of writing a P.S. on all of Bill's letters.

The week before, a few days before Remus had come to be debriefed, Harry and Fleur had spent some time in a corner of the living room, talking about Cedric and the final task. It was the first time they had directly mentioned it to each other. There were others in the room, but once they overheard snippets of the conversation, they left the pair alone. It was cathartic for both of them, and while Victor Krum was not there of course, they made plans to pay him a visit the next summer, or at least meet with him at the next Quidditch World Cup, due to be held outside of Sao Paulo, Brazil in July of 1998. One could assume that Victor, currently playing for the Sofia, Bulgaria based team in the Euro Quidditch League, would make the Bulgarian World Cup squad.

It was a fun night, and lots of Bill and Fleur stories were told by various parents and older siblings. More than once, some combination of Ron, Ginny, Dominique, and Gabrielle would say:

“Hey, I didn’t know that!” Much laughter greeted those exclamations as everyone learned a lot more about the happy couple and what they had been like growing up. Harry and Sophie were more or less the hosts of the night, and joined Dobby and Winky in making sure that everyone had enough to eat and drink. During a lull.

“Our wedding isn’t going to be this big is it Harry?”

“Well considering that our blood family members likely to attend are pretty low.....” Peter Weir would certainly be a problem, and while there was no engagement of course, Harry was already plotting on how to deal with him. Hey, he had to think about something while sitting on the toilet.

“True, but whatever will do it’ll be fine. Even if the wedding is here in Britain.” As it most certainly would be, if only because there was nowhere to hold it in America, except perhaps for Great Lakes, which did host a wedding or three in the summer usually, though none this summer involving a player in our tiny story. A muggle church would be out, not with all that magic around it, it would surely foul-up anything electrical.

“There’s nothing like a wedding to make you start thinking of one is there?”

“Harry, we girls think about them all the time. I had mine planned out when I was 12.” And the raising of the eyebrows in response.

“Oh really? And how had it been updated since then?”

“Well a British guy is the groom, that’s about it.”

“I’m not going to have any say in it am I?”

“You’ll get half the guest list, and I’m sure a vote in the location.” That was better than he thought he would do in that discussion, so he rightfully counted his blessings. Harry and Sophie had such an emotional connection, and so seldom fought, that they were just kind of in a holding pattern until they deemed themselves old enough to get hitched. Whatever else his problems were in life, our Harry knew he had found his mate.

“Aren’t you generous?”

“Yes I am, I’m so happy that you see it that way.” Harry just shook his head in mock exasperation, and went back into the living room. After a little while, he tugged on Arthur’s sleeve and motioned for him to follow him into the kitchen. Dobby and Winky were chattering away, and seemed to take no interest in them.....not true though, Dobby made a point of listening to these types of things, feeling that he could better be Harry’s major-domo if he knew everything that was going on with his friend/employer.

“What’s going on Harry?”

“It’s time for the shoe to be on the other foot.”

“Why do I not like the sound of this?” Harry grinned at him, and the older man relaxed instantly.

“I mean that I am going to question you for a change.”

“I only do that out of love Harry.....and curiosity.” Harry ignored this.

“How tight is the security going to be for the wedding?”

Ah, so that was it. He couldn't blame the lad for being interested.

“Well Harry, as you know The Burrow is Unplottable, and we have anti-portkey and anti-Apparition wards set up, and limited floo access. Only WWW, The Ministry, and Hogwarts can floo directly to us.”

“Auror coverage?”

“I haven't asked Amelia about any specifics, but Rufus will be there, and he never goes out in public without security.....and a few Aurors will be there as guests, like Tonks, and your friend Travis Biller.”

“Was he invited because he's my friend?”

“Partially I imagine, and because he's close to The Minister. He seems like a fine man, with what limited time I'm around him. You'll have to talk to Bill for the full details.”

“Speaking of Travis and The Minister.....I have a favor to ask of you and Molly.” This surprised Arthur, Harry was all about doing favors for others, not asking for them for himself.

“Name it.”

“I would like to have my Dumbledore meeting at The Burrow, right after the reception. You and Molly are more than welcome to sit in if you like.....and you would be welcome no matter where we hold it.” That Harry would want it in The Burrow had never occurred to either Molly or Arthur, and they had talked about it.

“Of course you can have it at The Burrow, but I would have thought you would want it here?”

“That man will never set foot in this house for the rest of his miserable life.” Arthur then said what they all assumed.

“Which might only have 24 more hours left in it?”

“Who knows, but I doubt it will be that short. No Arthur, I need him alive to help get Voldemort. Whatever happens tomorrow, I’ll have that in mind the entire time.”

“That’s good to hear. Who else will be sitting in?”

“My friends, and Rufus and Travis.....who I suppose are my friends also now that I think about it.” He was talking more about Rufus.

“I hear your town hall meeting thing with him was a great success.”

“He’s an interesting guy.”

“Yes he is Harry, yes he is. That’s a lot of people for one living room, it will get pretty crowded.”

“I’m sure not all of them will take me up on the offer.” He said that with a straight face, but didn’t really mean it, at most Angelina and Alicia wouldn’t show. The living room was far and away the largest room in the Weasley house, so it would be a cozy affair.

“You mind if I ask one, tiny little question of you Harry?” The lad surprised him by starting to laugh.

“Well considering I just asked for the use of your home to meet with my number two enemy.....” Arthur laughed too, pragmatism could be funny.

“Good, I was hoping you would see it that way. What do you hope to get out of this meeting with Dumbledore? If there are no drugs used, you have no guarantee that he’ll tell you the truth.”

“I know, and I’m sure he’ll bob and weave with the best of them.”

“Bob and weave?”

“It’s a muggle boxing term that Jonas’ dad taught me at Easter, it’s where the boxer moves his head and body, trying not to get hit.....but the trick is, he can’t do much hitting of his own. And that’s where I’ll get Dumbledore. He’ll spend so much time on the defensive that he won’t have a chance to press me about any inconsistencies in my story, or what my future plans might be.”

“You didn’t answer my question, not really.” Harry looked ever so slightly abashed.

“No I didn’t, sorry. I want Dumbledore to answer my questions, publicly, and defend his own positions and actions, publicly. That way his lies, half-truths, equivocations, and even his honest answers will all be on the record in front of you, Remus, my friends.....and The Minister and Head Auror.”

“So not quite blackmail, more along the lines of an insurance policy.”

“Something like that.”

“No blood on my carpet.”

“No promises there, but I’ll buy you a new one if it happens.”

“Dare I ask how much the bill for the wedding will wind up being?” Harry just looked at him innocently, and patted the back pocket where his wallet might have been.....if he carried it with him, which he rarely did.

“If you have to ask, you wouldn’t have been able to afford it. C’mon, let’s go back to the crowd.”

They did, and the ‘celebration’ lasted until almost 11 pm. Ron, Charlie, and Ginny would be up early at The Burrow to set up the chairs for the audience, and Dobby and Winky would be helping out all day as well,, their wedding present to Bill and Fleur. Marie and Ginny stayed up until the wee hours talking, and the American got a very Ginny-biased commentary on the events of the month, as well as a lowdown on a lot of the people she was to meet the next day. She had been reading stories about Dumbledore all her life, and was fascinated at the idea of seeing him going toe-to-toe with her new friend Harry.

Saturday, July 27, 1997

The Burrow

Mid-Morning

Bill was in his old room, getting his dress robes on and making sure his long hair looked just right. It was important to him somehow to look at least 1/100 as good as his bride, and he knew every eye would be on her.....maybe not Harry’s and Dumbledore’s all the time, since they would have full Occlumency shields up, the one thing they had in common this day. That was the one thing about this day that Bill was dreading, and he wouldn’t even be at the meeting. He knew that there was a good chance that this would be Albus Dumbledore’s last day on earth, unless he lingered while at St. Mungo’s. He had mentioned this to Harry the night before and the younger man just looked at him like he was insane.

“Um Bill, you’re marrying one of the most beautiful women in the world.....and you’re thinking about Dumbledore? I mean c’mon, focus here brother.”

And focus he did. Bill was not a 29 year old bachelor by choice, he was not the Brit equivalent of Jonas, and indeed he had been close to the alter once before. Said romance, which had ended five years before, had ultimately exploded right before the popping of the

question, and had made Bill wary of such things since. Until he met Fleur. What had started as a mutually appreciative glance before the final task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament had evolved into letters, then visits, and finally with Fleur taking a job with Gringotts and Bill staying in Britain as well. He had fallen in love with her through the letters, and it proved to him that she was not just a pretty face.....okay, not just a drop dead gorgeous face. Charlie knocked on the door and walked in, he had been using Ron's room to get ready, along with the other groomsmen. Fleur and her bridesmaids were using Ginny's and Percy's rooms.....the first use of Percy's room since he had 'left' to go through with his Fudge spying plans. The door had not even been opened since his death until the week before.

"You ready?" Bill decided that his hair, still long, should be loose.

"Almost, almost." To Charlie it just looked like Bill was fiddling needlessly, but he didn't call him on it.

"Nervous?"

"No, not really. I know I'm making the right choice, the right decision."

"The first of us to get married. Took you long enough."

"At least the twins and Ron won't be beating me to the alter, unlike some people I might mention." Heh.

"I'm married to my dragons, and they don't like mistresses." Charlie was on duty more hours than he was not, and all the other women at the Romanian Dragon Preserve were either married or beyond his desired age bracket.

"Just tell me that you'll think about coming back here come 1999. I know I can get you into Gringott's, Fortrap had all but put it in writing." The dragons at the bank did need handlers, and there were varied kinds as well. That fact that it would pay better was a given too, and while Charlie made a decent living where he was, Bill was hoping that maybe he would want something of a better lifestyle.

“I promise that I’ll think about it. Satisfied?” Not really, he figured Charlie was just sloughing him off.

“I am, though that was a nice roasting the kids gave you last night about not taking the Creatures job. Are the boys ready?”

“Harry is, the other three almost.”

“Our decisive little brother, he wastes no time does he?”

“Thank Sophie for that.” They both smiled at that, they loved Sophie.

“Well c’mon then, let’s go downstairs, our guests are starting to arrive.” They collected Harry, Ron, and the twins and moved downstairs and out the door. About half of the guests had arrived, including some familiar faces.

The guest list was just over 100, which was about all that The Burrow and its environs could hold. The ceremony and reception would of necessity be outside, but the weather was beautiful this day. Invited guests included many of the higher-ups at Gringotts, members of the relatively sprawling Weasley and Prewett families, more Delacours, and various and sundry friends and important acquaintances. Rufus would perform the ceremony, given Arthur’s ranking within The Ministry and his own friendship with the man and with Harry.

Given that The Burrow was currently Unplottable with limited floor access and anti-portkey wards up, wedding guests were directed to Apparate or portkey to a point just outside the actual village of Ottery St. Catchpole, population 1,203. From there, Arthur and Perkins, who was Bill’s godfather, would direct them on their way to The Burrow, a leisurely kilometer long stroll that most enjoyed, the countryside being nice to look at it. Molly and Eva Delacour greeted the guests as they arrived, and drinks and hors d’oeuvres were served as the pre-wedding was just as important a social event as the reception.

During June, Harry had engaged in a borderline nasty written war with Molly over his desire to pay for the wedding and reception, and

only won when he did an end around to Arthur and reminded him that they had three more weddings to pay for in the future, and that they should save their cash for that, and that was with the assumption that the twins would have a double wedding. In Wizard culture, in Britain at least, the groom's side paid for the wedding, while the bride's side provided a nice honeymoon, in consultation with the newlyweds. Isla de Marauder was briefly brought up, quietly, as a honeymoon spot, but it was discarded when the twins reminded Bill that he and Fleur could go there anytime they wanted, on five minutes notice. Fleur loved Italy, so Rome was their destination, the portkey trip would start as soon as the reception was over, thus the missing of the meeting.....though Dobby was due to meet them in Italy with an update if anything extraordinary should happen.

Bill and his groomsmen waded out into the crowd and began greeting the guests, about half of whom had gotten there at that point with more coming every minute. The gang, along with the Brit ladies were all mingling with various and sundry people, and Harry spotted a familiar face and went over to say hello.

It was Peter Tyson.

“Well hello there, how is our resident Yank doing?”

“Just fine Peter, thank you. How have you been?” Harry said that in his best Midwestern American accent, which wasn't very good.

“Fine myself, business is going nicely. Please ditch that ridiculous accent though.” They spent a few minutes catching up, though Tyson had kept an interest in his most famous client through Bill. They made plans to have lunch the next day at The Hollow, with Tyson's wife Jennifer and their twin daughters coming along as well. The gang had all heard about Peter from the get-go of their friendship with Harry, and the lad left them with him as he then spotted another familiar face, and decided to say hello. He walked over to him, and in his friendliest voice:

“Hello Hagrid, long time no see.”

Hagrid had seen him coming, but had not wanted to make any kind of a scene by moving away. He had been talking with Flitwick, who had just left him to get another drink.....Flitwick was something just shy of a tippler, though he was rarely like that at school.

“Harry.”

“How are you?”

“Fine.” A pattern was developing here, but Harry on the whole felt sorry for the half-giant, and wasn’t interested in provoking anything.

“Still pissed at me I take it.”

“Yes.” Hagrid’s tone of voice was neutral, but there seemed to be a lot more that he wanted to say.

“Why might that be? Because I went after Dumbledore?”

“Yes, the things you said.” Technically speaking, Harry had never ripped the old man in public. He refused to give The Daily Prophet the time of day, nor would he comment for the record to The Chronicle or The Quibbler. Everything he had said or implied had been in private.....except for the Howlers, that’s right, the Howler. That had been rather public, though he had only sent seven of them, voiced by every member of the gang including himself. Still, the cat had already been way out of the bag before the Howler barrage had occurred, and McGonagall, Draco, and Pansy Parkinson had all been hit much worse than the old man had.

“Was anything I said untrue?” Hagrid refused to address that part.

“He’s the greatest man who ever lived, and you betrayed him.” Harry then smiled, which disconcerted Hagrid all the more. There was nothing he could do in the face of such loyal certainty, and he was very, very aware that quite a few people were watching them.

“You have every right to your views Hagrid, however horribly misguided they may be. I won’t waste your time or mine trying to talk you out of them. I wish you nothing but the best.” He reached out his hand, and after a second’s hesitation, the larger man took it.....very briefly, and let go.

Harry then walked off to meet Sophie, leaving Hagrid standing there, looking confused. And more importantly, a lot of people were nodding in approval at Harry’s gesture. He changed some minds about him with one simple handshake.

“That must have been hard.” She had been close enough to hear.

“It was until ‘the greatest man who ever lived’ comment, that’s where the train left the tracks as far as I’m concerned.” He saw Flitwick coming toward their general direction, and sidled up to him for a brief moment.

“So you’re worried about me starting a killing spree in the castle eh? I’m so happy to disappoint you.” Flitwick was equal to the task.

“You wouldn’t come in there with revenge in mind if Malfoy had gone after one of your friends?”

“Only if you people had done nothing in response.....oh yeah, you wouldn’t have, that’s right.” Flitwick just shook his head.

“Revisionist history does not suit you Harry.”

“Nor does sticking your head in the sand exactly flatter you Filius.” The smaller man started chuckling, and changed the subject, he had no interest in antagonizing the lad any more than Dumbledore already had.

“So I hear you’re not the top person in Charms any longer?”

“My friend Reiko is, her parents are both teachers of it.” Flitwick had not known that.

“Well that’s understandable then, which school do they teach at?”

“Tecumseh.”

“A lovely school, I was placed at Pathfinder during my year abroad.”

“How did you like the mountains?”

“Less oxygen you know, took some getting used to. Nice gesture with Hagrid you made.”

“It was closure for the both of us, there’s no reconciling those differences.”

“No there isn’t, some rivers are too wide to be bridged.” He reached out his hand, and Harry shook it, both of them moving off to see other people. Harry also spent some time talking with Alexandra McDowell, his mother’s replacement teaching Ancient Runes. McDowell and Lily Evans had been roommates, and the other lady had been Bill’s favorite teacher during his Hogwarts years. She was on the fence as far as Dumbledore went, not being in his inner circle, yet not being a quiet antagonist either. McDowell simply kept her head down and tried to stay out of the fray as much as possible. It was worth noting that Umbridge barely messed with her during Inquisition time, feeling that Runes was not a politically significant subject. Harry had not known of Alexandra’s connection to his mother until after he decided to leave Hogwarts, otherwise he might have taken more of an interest in Runes. Harry saw Dumbledore and McGonagall, who arrived relatively late, but he studiously avoided them. He would have the pleasure of their company soon enough.

Soon enough, Arthur and Perkins came back and everyone was directed to their seats. Ushers for the day were Roger Cross, Carlo Rota, and Eric Balfour, the three of Bill’s roommates from Hogwarts that he still was in contact with. All were based in Britain in some form, and were part of Bill’s ‘crew’, as it were. The wedding party began marching down the aisle as The Weird Sisters began playing a slightly modernized version of wedding music, they were old friends

of Bill's. The groomsmen and bridesmaids went down in order of youngest to oldest, flip-flopping Laure and Petra, as the cousin was to be maid of honor, being Fleur's best friend as well as her cousin.

So Harry marched down with 10 year old Dominique, Ron with Gabrielle, Fred with Ginny, George with Laure, and Charlie with Petra. They stood there, with Bill, as Jean Claude led Fleur down the aisle. It was a dazzling display, as she was the most beautiful bride any of them had ever seen.....yes, she was slightly better looking than Laure, the sister who was already married. Harry could feel the Veela effect start to burn through his Occlumency shields, and took off his glasses and put them in his pocket. Due to Neville's plant secretion, his eyesight was pretty good compared to what it used to be, but it was enough to dull the buzzing. Not everyone was so fortunate though, as those who did not shield their eyes were somewhat hazy about the events if asked afterward.

Rufus was already thinking that this was the best wedding he had ever been to, all magical weddings should have some Veela elements in it, or so he mused to himself, while smiling benignly at everyone. He led them through the vows, and finished off with:

"William Prewett Weasley, do you take Fleur Monique Delacour to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?"

"I will."

"Fleur Monique Delacour, do you take William Prewett Weasley to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

"By the power vested in me as Minister of Magic for Great Britain, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Bill, if you would do the honors." And the honor was all Bill's.

Bill kissed his bride, and the hearts of pretty much everyone in the crowd melted, as most do at weddings. Fred and George were already planning in their minds what their joint wedding would be like, one likely to take place next summer. They would have it here as well, though they and Alicia and Angelina would be living full-time in Godric's Hollow. For their parts, the twins' ladies had already decided the date for the nuptials, and could be seen whispering to each other, talking about how much they liked the Delacour dresses.

Hermione and Sophie, sitting next to each other as it happened, were both thinking similarly, as was Reiko on Sophie's other side. And it wasn't just the women, Warrick was actually getting a little misty-eyed, and he was into double digits on the number of weddings he had been to. In the row in front of them all, Molly was all tears and sobbing of course, she had waited a long time for a son of hers to get married. Now she would be on the happy couple about grandchildren, to Fleur's everlasting joy.

Well not really, though Fleur would show remarkable patience and restraint when the topic was brought up. The happy couple did the march back down the aisle, and after a few minutes, the reception began. Tables had been set up all along the back lawn, with Arthur cutting a deal with the chief garden gnome that he and his brethren would get a hefty share of any leftover food if they would stay away during the festivities. He had readily agreed, and so the garden gnomes were neither seen nor heard for the afternoon.

The food was a mixture of Dobby/Winky Inc., Molly, and some special catering from The Leaky Cauldron.....and yes, some muggle pizzas that Harry had ordered specially. He was dying to get a picture of one of the Hogwarts faculty partaking in a slice, and was rewarded when he saw Hagrid gingerly picking one up and tasting it. Winky was duly summoned, and a nice picture was taken, she was the official wedding photographer anyway. Harry was unsure of what to do with the snapshot, but he liked having options for the future.

Bill and Fleur stuck around for about 90 minutes, there was no dancing to be held this day, though The Weird Sisters did play a few songs in between visits to the buffet tables. Harry got a chance to chat with them for a moment, and they seemed to know all about him.

They volunteered to play at his birthday party, assuming he had one, and our boy readily agreed. Fame wasn't all bad, he decided later on. After he said his farewells to the newlyweds, he found himself standing next to Ron.

"So I hear that you might be the groom next summer?"

"Oh I don't know, maybe the following Christmas. Wouldn't want to compete with whatever sideshow the twins put on for their wedding."

"I hear you, I'm shuddering at the thought of it."

"They're not bad, they've been alright this summer. Thanks for the raise by the way." Earlier in the week the twins had given their siblings each a slight raise in pay, as business was booming. Lee still made the most of any non-owner, a compensation for the twins' unspoken refusal to give him any ownership in the company.

"No problem, you two have earned it."

"Are we finally going to get our Quidditch game in tomorrow?" Quidditch, along with Capture the Flag, had kept getting postponed due to the vagaries of everyone's schedules.

"Supposedly. Alicia doesn't have to work, and Angelina has the day off from practice."

"That'll be fun, is it going to be Americans v. Brits?"

"No, not enough Americans to play. Drew and Claudia aren't big flyers. No, if we do that, we'll have to borrow someone to play Keeper. We'll figure it out on the day." They idly chit-chatted like that for a little while, falling back into old habits. Hermione and Sophie deliberately left them alone all the while, playing platonic matchmakers in a sense. Neville joined them eventually, and the three former roommates were together again.

The reception was just starting to wind down when Harry, flanked by Sophie and Warrick, approached Dumbledore and McGonagall.

“Albus, Minerva.”

“Hello Harry, wonderful ceremony wasn’t it?” McGonagall had flushed a little at Harry’s use of her first name, as she always did. Neither of them could look at each other without thinking of the Howlers, though Harry was the only one fighting off a smile when he did so. Their Umbridge trial alliance had been very brief.

“Yes it was, an inspiration to us all. Or have you two gotten married and told no one about it?” Dumbledore shocked them all by starting to laugh, even as his right arm laid firmly on McGonagall’s own wand arm.

“No we have not Harry, rest assured we would not have kept that a secret.”

“Glad to hear it. Are you ready for our meeting?” Dumbledore, slipping though he might be, was no fool, and he had thought that today would be a logical day for the meeting, if it ever took place.....he had had his doubts. So Harry’s abrupt segue barely fazed him.....abrupt segues being a Harry specialty.

“I am, is it to be here?”

“Yes it is, Arthur and Molly have generously allowed me use of their living room for the occasion. Minerva, will you be attending?” Dumbledore didn’t dare let McGonagall open her mouth right now, or she might decide to kick the battle off right then and there.

“Harry, I would prefer that it just be the two of us. I think we would solve our differences better without any other distractions.” Harry then spoke as if Dumbledore hadn’t said a word, though he was still using a genial tone of voice.

“So you will be joining us Minerva? Good, the Headmaster should have one ally in the room at least, since Hagrid and Professor Flitwick seem to have departed early. Oh yes, speaking of that Albus. Any mind tricks on me, any at all, and I will hurt you, I will hurt you so bad

you won't be capable of any tricks in the future. And no one other than your sycophant here will lift a finger to help you." He turned and walked away, and Dumbledore and McGonagall were faced with that warning, as well as the sights of Harry's roommate and his girlfriend laughing at them as they left as well. McGonagall waited until the young ones were out of earshot.

"Don't do this Albus, this is nothing but an excuse to assault you." Dumbledore was surprisingly condescending as he replied.

"He won't do anything of the sort Minerva, he would lose credibility with Molly, Arthur, every adult he is contact with here." She had heard these words before, and felt that now was the time to call him on them.

"You have never fully understood that boy Albus, and now is no different. This is not the same Harry Potter that trashed your office a year ago."

"This meeting will help me understand him, and me him."

"I don't see the need for a meeting at all, you'll have his assistance in the war whether you speak with him or not. Why subject yourself to his accusations? Accusations that you know you can never explain to his satisfaction." That last shot could be taken a few different ways, but Dumbledore was thinking about something else.

"It is not merely a question of that any longer Minerva. Harry has the support of The Minister, as well as Amelia. He could always ask them to compel me to meet with him, as they did with Remus." The fact that the old man had been begging for this meeting for almost a year seemed to be lost on him at the moment.

"Remus had no leverage to resist, and you know that. You are the Head of the Wizengamot, Headmaster at Hogwarts, among a dozen other titles. You are not a werewolf with potentially dubious loyalties who is susceptible to emotional blackmail." The breach between McGonagall and Remus that had opened after Harry's escape had

never fully healed, and the werewolf's increasing friendship with her new enemy Charles Shepherd did not help matters.

"We need to present a united front to Voldemort Minerva. Harry and I need to be on the same side, and since he has Rufus and Biller in his corner, then I must be the one to appear conciliatory. Only that way can we truly rout the Death Eaters and leave Harry to duel with Voldemort one on one."

"There's nothing I can do to convince you not to do this?"

"No Minerva, but now that I think on it, I am glad that you will be there." He started to walk slowly toward the house, with McGonagall having no choice but to fall in step with him. They entered the house to find it empty except for the living room. It was filled with the E-gang, Arthur, Remus, Travis, and Rufus. Molly and Charlie were still playing hostess and host to the remaining guests and might join them later, while Tonks was on duty at The Ministry and had not been able to attend the wedding. Dumbledore focused on Harry for the moment, though he was dismayed to see Rufus there.

"Harry."

"Albus, Minerva, please sit down."

They did so, on a two-seater couch that had been conjured up just for them. There was silence for a brief moment, and then Harry addressed Dumbledore.

"Albus, this is the meeting that you have been asking for since I left. I'm giving it to you, for my own reasons, but there are certain stipulations that you need to agree to, or else we are just wasting our time here."

Dumbledore was left with little choice, much to most people's satisfaction.

"Very well, what are they?"

“I will not be coming back to Hogwarts this Fall.” Talk about stating the obvious right off the bat.

“I had assumed as much.”

“Good, that’s a promising start. There is also to be no question of me joining The Order of the Phoenix.”

“I had hoped that you might reconsider your position on that score, at least after you have graduated from Great Lakes.”

“Nope, I’ve thought about it and thought about it, no dice.”

“If that’s your feeling, so be it.”

“Good, it’s nice to see that you’re so reasonable. Now let’s first dispense with any questions you might have for me. I will not try and have you take Veritaserum Albus, since I have absolutely no interest in imbibing myself, and I’m a lot of things, but I’ m no hypocrite. Shut up Minerva.” He could see that she was raring to take a shot, and his warning did not dissuade her.

“You are far too full of yourself Potter, ordering around Professor Dumbledore like he is your subordinate! And speaking to me with such disrespect!” Well he didn’t respect her, the Howler barrage should have explained that sufficiently.

“Minerva, do you believe in the Prophecy that Trelawney ‘saw’?” Where was he going with this?

“Yes I do.”

“Then if you do, that makes Dumbledore my subordinate, since the Prophecy says that only I can kill Voldemort. All roads lead through me Minerva, so from now on speak when you are spoken to, you’re sounding an awful lot like Umbridge lately.” Dumbledore quieted her with a look, and brought up the contradiction in Harry’s threat.

“Yet you do not believe in the Prophecy Harry, you’ve said as much many times.” True, very true.....and just to torment the old man:

“Really? Since when have you and I had a conversation longer than a minute since I trashed your office?”

“I do hear things.” Oh Harry could believe that.

“It’s not so easy though, when you don’t have ghosts, paintings, and Listening Charms to do your dirty work for you. You know, if Sirius hadn’t made Tonks swear that oath, I would have suspected that you would sneak her into my school.” Harry still checked The Map 2.5 every now and again, just to make sure there were no weeds in his garden.

“How very droll of you Harry.” That wasn’t a denial mind you, and Harry had neatly sidestepped his contradictory statement.

“I’m not going to sit here forever with you Albus, you might want to start asking questions now. We have dinner reservations in London, it wouldn’t do to miss them.” They had nothing of the kind, but Harry was going to enjoy himself if nothing else. Plus, it made sure that the meeting wasn’t going to be open-ended in length.

“What are your post-graduation plans?” A nice softball opener.

“As pertains to what exactly? My profession?”

“Yes, will you be attending the Auror Academy?” He didn’t need to attend it, according to Rufus and Chabon, but Dumbledore didn’t need to know too many specifics.

“I highly doubt it. Quidditch will be my initial profession, I haven’t decided which league I’ll be playing in yet, the American or British. Either way I’ll probably be living in America still.” Dumbledore was relieved that at least Harry wasn’t insisting on moving to Australia, in this one instance he was grateful for the existence of Sophie in

Harry's life, or the lad would be on the first plane to Sydney upon graduation.

"And why is that?"

"I like being around people my age, and an American university experience is the best way to go about it." That was the total truth, and it rang as such. In his heart of hearts, Dumbledore supposed he couldn't blame Harry, very few magicals in Britain went on to muggle university, though he assumed that Hermione would be one of them.

"Will you still be coming over for League meetings?"

"That is my arrangement with Minister Scrimgeour here, my payment in part for the tutoring my friends and I have been getting. I'm assuming that you knew about that."

"I did, and I was very pleased to hear about it." Uh huh, thought the collective Brits not named McGonagall.

"It has been working out very nicely, thanks to The Minister and Travis, they chose very excellent tutors for us. It's worth asking why you did not set something like this up in the past for me, or in the present for the other five."

"In the past we did not have the Defense teachers that we might have, and in spite of there being no classes in July and August, my schedule is still quite busy, as is Professor McGonagall's and Professor Flitwick's."

"That's your answer, really? Sorry, but I'm just too busy to bother?" Dumbledore flinched a bit, and McGonagall bristled.

"I have also not had the full cooperation of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the Minister's Office, as you seem to have."

"Well I don't treat them like subordinates Albus."

“No, you have merely played on being The Boy Who Lived.” Harry liked this salvo, and smiled.

“It’s about time I got some usefulness out of it. At Hogwarts it was only brought up as a negative, mostly by your pet Snape. How is his grave by the way? Do you visit it often, to be reminded of how he played you? Are tears shed?” He was hoping for an explosion that wasn’t quite there yet.

“We don’t know that Harry, we will never know who’s side he was truly on.” Despite having said the same thing himself moments after reading the news, Harry started laughing.

“Your loyalty to that man astounds me. Tell me something, he’s not your son is he? I know that there’s no physical resemblance, but the facts seem to fit no other theory.” Luna let out a giggle, but no one else reacted to the giggle or the theory. They all wanted this to play out as a one-on-one, not as a gang attack.

“Severus and I are blood related only in that all pure and mixed blood families in our country are related, as are you and I. He was not my son, nor my grandson, younger brother, or nephew.” Dumbledore had been asked this question before it seemed.

“Oh well, I suppose I have to take your word for it.” His tone of voice all but called Dumbledore a liar, but the old man didn’t rise to the bait.

“Yes.”

“I hear Shepherd is very popular.”

“Yes he is, his students are devoted to him. I anticipate that most Sixth Year students will sign up for Potions come next month.” Ginny and Luna both nodded that they would be doing so, and Dumbledore smiled at them, this wasn’t going too badly so far he thought.

“Why did you lie when you said that there was no one to teach me Occlumency besides Snape?”

Well that didn't last long.

“I did not lie, I merely said that he was the best person to teach you. I wanted someone within The Order and preferably within Hogwarts. That left only Severus and I, and I explained to you my reasons for not teaching you myself.”

“And believe it or not, I agree with your rationale on that one very narrow point. Given how vulnerable I was to Voldemort's mind tricks I can't blame you for not doing it.” The old man was a little nonplussed.

“Thank you.”

“But you were a ruddy idiot for not being more flexible as to who actually would teach me. It's not that hard you know, learning it, It took me three or four weeks of diligent practice. Even you wouldn't last long inside my mind right now.” That was Harry all but begging the old man to try something like that, but again he demurred, firing back on a different tack.

“Perhaps things would have been different if you had done this practice earlier.” ‘Things different’ meant Sirius of course, and everyone knew it. Remus subtly shifted in his seat, making his wand easier to get to.

“You let a man who hated my guts invade my mind.”

“He was willing to put aside his hatred, if you had only tried.”

“You really are a fool, you know that? I mean the rank stupidity that comes out of your mouth whenever you talk about Snape just defies my highly developed imagination.”

“Insulting me might make you feel better Harry, but it does not solve any of our problems.” Yes it did make him feel better, Harry was enjoying this meeting quite a bit so far.

“Well I’m of the view that our problems probably can’t be solved, but I allowed myself to be talked into this meeting, so I’m here. You certainly aren’t telling me anything new or unexpected. Now let me ask you something Albus: In your best case scenario, what are you hoping to leave this meeting with?” The man’s response was immediate.

“An understanding between us, and a halt to the personal and professional digs by you against me, privately and publicly.”

“Lofty goals, perhaps you should shoot a bit lower.”

“You asked me what I wanted, and I replied honestly.”

“You speaking of being honest, my goodness, it’s like Ron saying that he’s short. Well I’ve only publicly dug at you with the Howlers, and given the rumors, it would have looked very curious if I had roasted Minerva, Draco, Pansy, and the others, and not you. It might have even made you look worse, people would have thought you were suppressing them. And to answer yours and Minerva’s unasked question: Neville, Luna, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron found out about the Howlers at the exact same time you did, I didn’t want any retribution carried out against them.”

“So Remus informed me at the time. I noticed that you stopped the campaign before Christmas.”

“Too much of a good thing makes it not such a good thing. And you just proved my point, at all other times I’ve not trashed you in public, though I’ve had every opportunity.”

“So you say. I have also held back on criticizing you as well, much as I would have liked to at times.”

“True, but you need me, I don’t need you.”

“You may think so, but you cannot defeat Voldemort and the Death Eaters without my assistance, disdain it though you might.” That gave Harry the opening he wanted, and he slammed through it.

“I needed your assistance when I was being smacked around by Vernon and Dudley, and being made a household slave by Petunia. Where were you then? Where was your high-toned brand of crap when I truly needed you?” This was really the sole reason, beyond Rufus asking him to, that Harry had agreed to this meeting, to have a reckoning about the Dursleys and Sirius. Dumbledore rose to the bait, just as expected.

“You were provided for Harry, perhaps not as comfortably as we would have hoped, but you were safe in Privet Drive.” That was very cold, and Harry leapt out of his chair and strode half the distance between him and the old man:

“SAFE FROM WHO!?”

Dumbledore didn’t bat an eye, and his hand got no nearer to his wand than it already was. He knew that Rufus would not let this degenerate into violence, and in his best ‘grandfatherly’ tone of voice:

“Calm down Harry.” Harry was calm anyway, his screaming was always an act designed to keep the other person off balance. He remained standing, but did not advance on his ‘foe’, his voice dripping with contempt.

“Oh sod off you addle minded geriatric. Who was I safe from? Who did I NEED to be safe from? Death Eaters that should have had no incentive to take me out? A ghost of Voldemort that was years away from being reborn? If Lucius and his boys had really wanted me, it would have taken them maybe a day to research where I must have been.” Dumbledore was ready for that argument and many others, he had known that the Dursleys would be a prime topic of conversation.....though he had not realized the extent of the grievance it seemed.

“I had those records altered Harry, giving Lily’s family a different last name. Remus here, and a few others from their class at Hogwarts were the only ones who knew where Petunia Evans might conceivably be, and even fewer knew Vernon’s last name. Even without the Blood Protections, you were safer from Lucius at Privet Drive than you would have been living with Remus or Sirius.”

“So I was protected.”

“Yes.” Harry took another step forward, and this time the rage was not just for show.

“WHO PROTECTED ME FROM THE DURSLEYS!”

“Mrs. Figg was there and could summon me on a moment’s notice.”

“After the fact! A middle age squib was supposed to protect me from half a kilometer away!? What if Dudley had gone overboard on one of hundreds of times? He spent 10 years plus pumped up with hate, fed to him by Vernon and Petunia! I’m the luckiest teenager on the face of this earth, just for still being alive after all that time in there.”

“There was nothing I could do about that Harry, Petunia was adamant that I stay out of things there.”

“And you went along with that? You forced her to take in a child that she hated.....I repeat HATED, and did not bother to make sure that said child was protected. You have got to be the dumbest smart person I’ve ever met in my life. One little threat would have done it, one lie about Listening Charms that probably didn’t even need to be put in the house, as long as the threat was there. Let us note for the record that she didn’t say boo to me after Remus, Arthur, and Moody threatened them on my behalf last summer.” The threats that Dumbledore himself had repudiated, though he hadn’t gone so far as to tell Petunia that.

“I knew that she would never allow her husband or son to permanently harm you. She may have hated magic, but deep down she still loved her sister.” Harry wanted to tear his hair out.

“I hate your sodding guts Dumbledore. I hate you just a tick’s whisker less than I do Tom Riddle and Peter Pettigrew.” Harry’s voice was very low, and filled with more loathing than anyone in the room had ever heard, even Ron and Hermione. Dumbledore didn’t accept this declaration though.

“No you don’t Harry, you’re an emotional young man, and you just won’t accept that some things are not what we would like them to be. You’re alive because Petunia took you in, I firmly believe that otherwise you would not be.”

“What gave you the right to make that choice in the first place? What right did you have to abrogate Sirius’ guardianship?”

“I was, and am, Head of the Wizengamot Harry, that gives me the right. Sirius was taken into custody a few days later, and I thought all along that he was the Secret Keeper, so he had to be guilty. I was wrong about that, but not wrong about making sure that the Blood Protections kept you safe from harm. I knew all along that Voldemort was not totally gone, and that it was just a matter of time. Sirius would not have given you the kind of protection you needed, he loved action too much. You saw that for yourself two summers ago, and again last summer at The Ministry.”

“So it doesn’t matter that Dudley beat on me for a decade, that Vernon and Petunia tried to literally stamp the magic out of me.....magic that I didn’t even know was there!”

“It does matter Harry, but not as much in the grand scheme of things as you seem to think it does. Petunia kept you safe.”

“You keep repeating that like it’s supposed to convince me of something. There were a hundred better options than putting with those people, and I somehow doubt you considered a one of them.” Dumbledore attempted to head one off at the pass.

“You could not have grown up in the castle Harry, you must know that.” Harry’s laugh was more bitter than ever.

“Five years ago, even two years ago, I would have gleefully argued that point with you til we were both blue in the face. Not now, not after learning that my life was a lie, that I was nothing more than a weapon to you. You made me love you Dumbledore, I worshiped the ground you walked on, all because I thought you cared about me.”

“I did and do care about you Harry.”

“Only because I’m the one to kill Voldemort, assuming Trelawney is correct, which is just as large an assumption as Snape being on our side.” To his credit, Dumbledore was not backtracking in the face of this hostility.....and it wasn’t just from Harry, the ‘grand scheme of things’ salvo had not gone over well with the rest of the crowd, and he could feel the disgust radiating from them.

“You don’t know that he was not, and I do care about you as a person, and I would have cared whether you were The Boy Who Lived or not. Most cannot say the same.”

“Liar.” Dumbledore was momentarily confused as to which part he was supposed to be lying about, so he generalized.

“You know it to be true.”

“You left me alone in that castle to fend for myself, knowing I would be a target for Snape and Malfoy, and every rumor which our idiot public would grasp on to. You knew the whole time that there was no chance that I was the Heir of Slytherin, yet you left me alone. If not for Ron and Hermione, I might have slit my wrists.” There were gasps from everyone but Ron and Hermione, who both recognized instantly that he was shading the truth. Harry continued.

“You didn’t tell me about Sirius and Remus until it was too late, you had two Death Eaters teaching Defense! You let me be kidnapped by Voldemort!”

“Yet here you are Harry, tougher and stronger than any 16 year old Wizard in history, myself included.”

And with that, every Dumbledore defense and response was tied together. Rufus just sighed very loudly, and Travis took his wand out of his pocket. They both looked at Harry, and seemed ready to arrest Dumbledore at his signal.

“So that’s why then, you wanted to toughen me up for the final battle?”

“No Harry, but I am not disappointed that your life experiences have made you the person that you are. I would rather have you hate me and be ready to kill Voldemort, than love me and be grist for the mill. I honestly believed I was doing the right things for you when I did them, and while there are small details that I wish had been handled differently, the overall picture is how it should be.”

“Even with me in the States?” The old man then made a very reluctant admission.

“That was never what I had in mind, but I cannot deny that you have thrived there.”

“So you apologize for nothing?”

“No Harry, I had the best of intentions and I still do. Our differences are a matter of opinion, not fact.” The certainty in that statement almost made Harry snap.....but not quite. He turned to Rufus and Travis.

“Minister Scrimgeour, I am formally pressing a complaint against this man for the crime of child abuse, thousands of counts of it.” Rufus sighed again, and stood up.

“Albus, please tell us all that you were kidding when you said that Harry deserved to grow up in that house and be abused by those fools for over a decade.”

“I did not say that he deserved it Minister, you are twisting my words. I simply did not interfere with a family decision making process, that is all. Legally, I did nothing wrong.” McGonagall was unwilling to say a word, unwilling to say that she had argued against the placing of Harry with the Dursleys, on the very night that it had happened no less.

“Harry, come with me please, I need to speak with you for a moment.”

“Yes Minister.”

Rufus quickly whispered into Travis’ ear.

“If either of them so much as try to leave the room, arrest them.”

“Got it.” Rufus motioned for Harry to follow him.

The two of them went into the kitchen, as Molly and Charlie were still outside with a few of the Prewetts. Rufus threw up a Silencing Bubble so that they could speak freely.

“All right then, we need to solve this quickly and I mean now. The Wizengamot is not going to chuck him in Azkaban for putting you with the muggles, much as I would like them to. And even if they would, we do need the old man around to help with the Death Eaters.”

“I know.”

The abrupt agreement threw Rufus a bit, but he rallied.

“Good, I was hoping that you would be reasonable.....and I don’t know why I didn’t think you would be, you never move further than you have to Harry, I admire that about you.”

“I appreciate the compliment sir.”

“It was entirely genuine I assure you. Now we have to figure out a punishment for that idiot so that we can all get on with the war, not to mention dinner.”

“A punishment for a crime that he won’t admit to?”

“Oh he knows he did wrong, he just won’t give you the satisfaction of admitting it in front of so many people.”

“So what do we do then?” Not so surprisingly, The Minister had a plan in mind going in.

“How does three million galleons sound?” Harry wasn’t a bit surprised, but faked a little shock anyway.

“It sounds like a lot of money, who would be paying it? And to whom?”

“Dumbledore to you, or I use this.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Harry. He read it in a few seconds, and nearly choked.

It was an undated order by the Hogwarts Board of Governors for Dumbledore’s dismissal.

Signed by all of the members.

“What the…….” Sensing that extreme profanity was coming, Rufus headed him off at the pass.

“Some things I need to keep to myself Harry, but I assure you that it’s very real.”

“And you don’t want Dumbledore running loose where he can bother you?”

“Right in one, though I am willing to fire him right now if he doesn’t pay up……and yes, he has the money, he’s probably worth 10 times

that much, with no direct heirs to get it once he's dead. Hell, there's a half decent chance that you're his heir anyway, how quickly he accepts will give us a hint on that score. Harry, I think what he did was beyond the pale, putting you with your relatives like that, but I am hoping that you can be persuaded to move on. I'm not saying you have to forget, or even forgive him.....but settling this now is in all of our best interests. I am in no way ordering you to do anything, I don't have that much authority. But I'm asking you, can you live with it?" Harry thought about it for a very long minute, and came to a decision, the only right decision he could make here.

"Four million." Rufus didn't hesitate for a second, and moved to eliminate the Silencing Bubble.

"Done, let's go back in."

"You would have gone to five, wouldn't you?"

"Four and a half maybe, but remember that it's not my money." Harry laughed for a second.

"It won't look to them like I'm being paid off?" The Minister didn't miss a beat.

"Why is that bad? Muggles settle civil claims all the time for money, to redress grievances. Even Wizards do occasionally. Your friend Peter Tyson doesn't live on criminal cases alone."

"You think he'll agree to this?"

"He won't have any choice, I might not even have to threaten him with the letter." He hoped he wouldn't either, though it was the gift that would keep on giving, the perennial bluff.

"I hope you don't have to, though part of me wants to see the look on his face when you spring it in on him."

“I’ve resisted that urge for months Harry. If you don’t mind me asking, what were you hoping for as a punishment? You agreed that he shouldn’t go to Azkaban.”

“His resignation from the Wizengamot, and from being Head of the League. Not much more really, I wasn’t looking for a pound of flesh. I just can’t believe that he’s not sorry, that he still justifies what he did. An apology would have gone a long way toward healing the breach.”

“I can’t believe it either Harry, but part of me respects him more for not weeping and begging for forgiveness. At least he has the sand to stick to his convictions, and he didn’t lie to you.” Harry thought much the same.

The two of them walked back into the living room.

“Albus, I have persuaded Harry to not press charges against you, charges that could prove beyond damaging to you.” Dumbledore immediately didn’t like the sound of this.

“And what am I to do in return?”

“An undisclosed financial settlement.” Gasps in the audience, but not from everyone.

“I am to bribe Harry not to press charges? Charges that won’t stick in any case?”

“I would add my weight to the charges, and institute a few changes in your legal status as well.”

“Such as?”

“Well besides declaring your precious Order to be outlawed, something I should probably have done months ago anyway, I would be more than willing to revisit the Educational Decrees, and a few other unpleasant things that would do you no favors.” Dumbledore

knew that Rufus disliked him intensely, and while he was not afraid of prison time, some things were just not worth the fight.

“How much money are we talking about?”

Rufus took out another slip of paper, and a muggle ballpoint pen that he carried around for such purposes. He scribbled a figure down, and handed the scrap paper to Dumbledore. The old man’s eyes went up, but he did not refuse.

“And what do I get in exchange?” Rufus turned to Harry, The Minister’s theory about how quick an agreement they got was gaining more credence.

“I will not press charges, and legally forgive you for all past crimes and injustices that you have perpetrated on me, but only those that you have admitted to. Anything still buried that comes to light, you will answer for. I will further cease any pranking harassment of you and your faculty, again, as long as new crimes do not either come to light or are generated anew. I will also promise not to attack you or challenge you to any duels on these matters for as long as Voldemort remains at large.” The loophole was easily read, but Dumbledore was still somewhat pleased that he was getting off relatively lightly.

“Very well, that is acceptable.”

“And I have one further demand, besides the money.” Raised eyebrows by Dumbledore.

“And that is?”

“Your Oath, as well as Oaths by Minerva and the rest of your faculty that Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Luna, and Neville will have no reprisals against them in the slightest for what happened here today, or at any point in the past. I will not demand special favors for them, as they would never accept them under these circumstances, but I want no harm to come to them either.” The five in question did look grateful to hear that.

“Agreed.” Dumbledore looked to McGonagall, who readily nodded her head as well.

“I will so swear.”

Rufus and Travis looked at each other with relief, and the letter remained in Rufus’ pocket, both figuratively and literally, for future use.

“Good then, it’s all.....well alright, it’s not settled emotionally, but it is practically. Albus, for my own opinion, you did this young man wrong in more ways than I can count. And your lack of remorse is duly noted as well. Should it go without saying that you are not to make any more custody decisions without strict supervision?”

Dumbledore prudently didn’t say a word, and Rufus took that as a yes.

“Good. Now have your house elf take instructions to Gringotts for the money transfer. Fortrap, Harry’s banker, is waiting as we speak.” McGonagall rounded on Harry.

“You planned this well Potter.” It was not said as a compliment, and Rufus just smilingly sneered at her.

“Harry is very good with planning McGonagall, but this one was my initiative, not his. It has been my pleasure to assist him here, somehow he turned into an outstanding young man, despite what you and your Master have done to him. Albus, you’re wasting time, start the transfer now.” McGonagall wasn’t willing to say boo to Rufus, in his hearing at least. Dumbledore just shrugged, and soon his own chief house elf, Tettry, was on his way to Fortrap with Dumbledore’s Gringott’s key and written instruction to transfer four million galleons to Harry’s vault.....Harry’s net worth had now been tripled.

Fortrap sent Tettry back 15 minutes later, with a note that said that the transfer of funds was currently taking place, and would be finished within the hour. Harry accepted a sheet of paper that included his new Gringott’s balance, which included all three banks that Harry had accounts in: Milwaukee, Toronto, and London.

6,102,303 galleons

He gulped a little, and put the note in his pocket, turning to Dumbledore.

“Good day Albus, Minerva. I will see you next month at the League meeting in Diagon Alley.”

McGonagall quickly rose to her feet, and was out of the room before Dumbledore could get out of his chair.

“I suppose an offer to shake your hand would be refused?” Harry knew that he should shake, but just couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“It would be yes. I’ll expect the written Oaths to be delivered to WWW no later than tomorrow.” That small part of the settlement had always been in his mind, at least it had been since he committed to the idea of the meeting. The meeting had not lasted nearly as long as Dumbledore had hoped, and he still had many questions.....but at the same time, he knew that if he antagonized Harry or Rufus, the price might go up. He had actually been worth 34 million galleons before this, but he was somewhat of a spendthrift.

“Very well, I will see you next month. Have a good return trip to Great Lakes. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Dumbledore left, and the air was let out of the room. Rufus motioned to Travis to join him.

“Well alls well that ends well, or words to that effect. Arthur, it was a lovely wedding, thank you for asking me to officiate. Harry, if the Oaths don’t get to WWW by Monday morning, let me know and I’ll tear off another piece of hide.”

“I will Minister, and thank you for being here, and for your counsel.”

“You’re very welcome Harry. Good day folks.” He gave a slight wave, and he and Travis walked out. Arthur got up and went over to Harry, putting his hand on his shoulder, only he seemed willing to talk first.

“Are you okay Harry?”

“I just can’t believe that.....”

“I know Harry, any affection or liking I had for the man is now finished. He will never be welcome in my home again.”

“Just so you all know, the money wasn’t my idea, it was The Minister’s.” Ron had been willing to ask him just that, though he knew he would suffer for it with Hermione in private. He still got a question in about it, sort of.

“What were you shooting for?”

“Resignation from the Wizengamot and from being Head of the League. I wouldn’t have asked for anything if he had apologized.”

“You gave him enough chances, that’s for sure. Thanks for the Oath thing by the way, that was nice thinking.” Nods from the other four DOM’s in agreement.

“I don’t want you lot suffering for this. I’m glad that’s over, thanks for being here guys.” Sophie had gotten up and pulled him into a hug, whispering.

“Are you really okay?”

“I’m going to be just fine, thanks in no small part to you.” He pulled away.

“Well it seems I just came into a bunch of money. Dinner tomorrow night in London is on me, the best restaurant we can find. Tonight we’ll just get pizza or something.”

“Why tomorrow night?” That was Ron, and Hermione answered him, its not like he was conversant in London restaurant eating.

“There are over 20 of us Ron, the odds of a fine dining London restaurant being able to take a party of our size on short notice is rather small. Tomorrow might even be pushing it.”

“We’ll figure out something. C’mon you lot, let’s go get things cleaned up, with all of us helping it should be done in no time. And Molly and Charlie need to be filled in too.” Everyone soon left the living room, went out to the yard to find that not only were all the guests now departed.....but they were greeted by the sight of 30 garden gnomes eating sandwiches and wedding cake.

Now they had seen everything.

End Chapter

Author's Note: Angelina's Quidditch game is due to take place the weekend after Harry and the gang go back to Michigan, I don't think that was made too clear in the last chapter, not that I'll make you readers take the trip to Mongolia with her. Probably. Just be grateful that I didn't feel like doing any Mongolian research during these couple of writing weeks. Heh heh. Also, for those curious, the four million galleon fine that was laid on Dumbledore is the equivalent of 10 million pounds and 15 million dollars, give or take, according to the conversions I set up in Chapter Four. Oh yeah, I called Dumbledore a spendthrift when I actually meant the opposite, a miser. One last thing: The length of this story is starting to get some comments, but the thing to keep in mind is that it's a two year story. Most authors would have split it into two parts, with the Umbridge trial being the denouement of the first half. I just chose to keep it all in a single story, to make it easier to access if nothing else.

Sunday, July 28, 1997

2:00 pm

The front yard of Godric's Hollow

Quidditch had been played during the middle hours of the morning, a kind of half court game if you will, given the relatively small front yard area of the manor. They set up one, very rickety, set of three hoops, and Ron played Keeper for both sides. Harry, the twins, Charlie, and Ginny took on Reiko, Warrick, Alicia, Angelina and a very game for it Arthur, playing Beater for the first time in a long, long time. No Seekers were used, because of the short field, despite the fact that they had four Seekers available for duty. Lee had a fun time announcing as Harry's Hollows defeated Arthur's Aces by a score of 400-380.....though Charlie and Ginny both accused Ron of letting a few goals in to even up the score a little more. Ron admitted to nothing, all the while being patted on the back by his father. Charlie, who was in Britain for the coming week before going back to Romania, played Quidditch all the time with his co-workers, so he was probably in better game shape than the rest of them. He scored 20 of the goals for his squad, reminding all of them that 27 years old was not that old indeed.

Molly and Hermione weren't in attendance, as they were seeing off the remaining Delacours back to France, the lot of them were having brunch at The Leaky Cauldron. Molly had requested that Hermione assist her there, as she felt that it was far past time that the two of them should get closer acquainted. Hermione, for her part, felt that she saw enough Quidditch during the school year, and wasn't miffed at missing the pickup game in the least. For all the years that Hermione had been coming to The Burrow for visits, she and Molly had rarely spent any time talking alone, the younger woman had always been off with Ron or Ginny. Molly, sensing that Hermione would soon be joining the family officially, wanted to get to know her soon-to-be daughter. This was something she had long ago done with Angelina and Alicia, and Fleur as well in the last year or so. This particular iteration went pretty well on the whole, despite the two of them having very little in common. Mainly they just talked about the wedding and its aftermath, as well as about Harry and Ron in general. Dean was due back on August 20th, and Arthur had been coerced into planning an outing just for the two of them as well.....with hopefully no death threats or shotgun-style ultimatums, it would be one of Angelina's Quidditch games if Arthur had anything to say about. Daughters were rare in the Weasley clan, but Arthur had a firm idea of what to do there.

They got back for lunch, having collected the Tyson family along with them, and a couple hours were spent thoroughly comparing Hogwarts with Great Lakes, all the way from the classrooms to Argus Filch v. Riley Poole.....the one that was on the payroll won that one in a walk of course. It turned out that Jennifer Tyson had a cousin who had a daughter that was a Freshman-to-be at Pathfinder, the cousin himself was a Hogwarts graduate who had married an American woman. She volunteered to do some letter writing to the youngster about maybe going to work for WWW.

The twins were all for it, and they and Harry managed to convince a nervous Dobby that just because Pathfinder was built into the mountains, that didn't mean it was likely to fall down anytime soon. I mean if Stinger missiles couldn't do the job.....

Now, on the lawn, it was Capture the Flag time, finally. The sticky point had always been that Harry was insisting that everyone be there

for it, and Alicia was working a lot of weekends, as she was still very low on the totem pole at The Daily Prophet.....whose proprietor, Augustus McCrae, did not know who Alicia's landlord was at the moment, which was good for her. She planned to keep it that way too, as she liked both her job and her landlord.

Warrick had queried Harry on why this game was so important to him, and the lad had responded:

"I don't know mate, it just seems like it would be a lot of fun. I mean we're young, healthy, and in our last week in what I've come to view as paradise, non-beach version." Warrick took that in for a second, and replied:

"Wow.....you really have gone crackers haven't you?"

"Don't start Warrick."

"Yes dear."

"I have not, in point of fact, gone crackers.....I was this way a long time ago."

"Ah, to have known the real you."

"It's buried under many layers of psychosis."

"No kidding."

The others joined them, sparing Harry the need to come up with a good rejoinder. He, Drew, and Hermione quickly had a huddle and decided on the teams.

The teams were divided up thusly:

Harry, Drew, Ron, Luna, Alicia, Fred, Claudia, Reiko, and Arthur

Against:

Sophie, Marie, Hermione, Neville, George, Angelina, Lee, Warrick, and Charlie.

A cursory read of the lineups will note that couples were split up, just to enhance the flavor of the competition. The object of the game of course, was the capture of the other team's flag. Harry's side started in the front part of The Hollow, with Sophie's team on the back. Magic was allowed in a limited way, as they could not bury or Disillusion the flag, or use any spells that directly impacted another person. Also, anything that attracted muggle attention would lead to the disqualification of said team, as well as the obligation of explaining to the Obliviators of why they had to come over on their days off. Harry had one thing to say before they started though:

"Okay, I know that I'm the last one who should be saying this, but let's remember one thing: This is fun. Yeah, we're competing and all that, but this is fun. Fun, fun, fun."

"Til your daddy takes the T-Bird away?" Ah The Beach Boys.

"Right Warrick." Harry had no idea what that meant, but he assumed that most of the others did.

They didn't, but who cares right?

"So no one is going to get hurt, physically or any other way. Fun, no snowball fight flashbacks for anyone. Alright then, let's split up. My people stay here, Sophie, take your second place team to the backyard."

"Says the man who will be sleeping on the floor in his own house tonight."

"Perhaps, but since I own the bed too....." Sophie just giggled, and led her people around to the back, conjured up flag in tow. The sucker was six feet high, including the staff. Each person was given a Filibuster firework to use in case he or she got the flag. Sophie, as she reached the side of the house, had one last rule change to shout out to her fellow.

“No Dobby and Winky! Neither side gets to use them!”

“Fine, I’ll just do it the hard way!” When she and her team were out of sight, Harry snapped his fingers in frustration, saying to no one in particular.

“Dang it, that was my big plan.”

Harry turned to his people and pointed to the woods behind them.

“Ron, find somewhere in there that we can put the flag. Use a Sticking Charm and put it facing away from here. Arthur, spend a few moments bonding with your son, but both of you remember where you put the thing.” Ron, pleased to be given the responsibility, grabbed the flag.

“Got it, let’s go Dad.”

“Lead on son.” Arthur had never been explored outside The Hollow before the morning’s Quidditch game.....which he was still a little tuckered out from. He decided then and there that he and Molly were going to start taking nightly walks after supper.

“Reiko, you and Luna get up on the roof and spy on them, and make sure that they’re not spying on us. Fred, Alicia, assist our friends to get up there. Drew, you and Claudia go left and right and make sure no one comes before we’re ready.” Everyone just stared at him.

“Okay, so I’ve been thinking about this a little.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I did all the planning Claudia, I’m going to be taking it easy for a minute.” Claudia rolled her eyes, and just to mess with him, went left instead of right. The others scattered, and Harry walked to the edge of the woods, waiting for Ron and Arthur to come back.

They were back in a couple of minutes, smiles on their faces.

“It’s done, they would have to look right at it to find it.”

“You covered it with dirt I take it?”

“Right you are, and some leaves too.” They were interrupted by Reiko and Luna yelling at them, the two were floating down off the roof. The three men walked back over to them, as Drew and Claudia were the only ones to keep their positions.

“What’s going on?”

“Hermione and Marie put up some kind of blue mist, we can’t see anything at all.

“Are they trying to spy on us?”

“No, they just have Angelina and Neville doing what Drew and Claudia are. We couldn’t see anything through the mist.” That got Harry curious.

“I wonder if it’s the same kind of mist they used at the obstacle course.” Marie had not done that particular event, but he supposed she might have asked Westin or Greenleaf, she was in their sections of Charms and Defense. This was the first he had thought of it, and he made a mental note to find out.....so he did, he repeated his routine from there and conjured a Quaffle.

“Fred, who’s got the better arm, you or me?”

“I would probably say that I do, but not by much. You want me to throw it into that mist I take it?”

“If you would please.” Fred took the Quaffle, tossed it up and down a few times and walked over to the diving line at the side of the house.

Neville was on that side, and before he could react, Fred threw the Quaffle high into the air.

And then Banished it straight at the mist.....and no Snitch ever juked around like the Quaffle did when it hit that stuff. It spit the ball back so hard it almost nailed an unsuspecting Neville right in the back of the head, landing back at Fred's feet.

It had been George who had told the ladies about the mist, unbeknownst to his twin he had made a beeline to Maloney to find out the particulars of it, thinking that WWW could use it as a prank in some way. The mist didn't surround them of course, but it had been placed on three of the sides, with only the way to the woods being free and clear.

"Alright then, something tells me that Finite Incantatem would spoil the fun." Drew and Reiko had used the same spell during their obstacle runs, but Fred had used a different stratagem.

"I just vaulted over it." It had been over 20 feet in the air, and was an impressive feat, or so the crowd thought at the time.

"Ah magic. Claudia, Reiko, Fred, use a Fire Hose Spell and annoy them." Grins all around as they did so. Neville, hamstrung at first by the rule that no magic could be directly used at someone, meaning you couldn't launch a spell from your wand that went right at another person. So he watched helplessly as his teammates got a little bit wet, they were close enough to get wet, but not drenched.

Meanwhile, at Team Sophie, they had not bothered to put the flag into the woods behind them. They just gave it to Warrick and had him put it behind his back, through his t-shirt. He had the flag by four inches and as long as he faced the right way, and he slowly backed his way toward the woods, ready to make a break for it if Harry's bunch penetrated the mist, which also hid his movements. Sophie still sent people straight into the woods just for the benefit of any Harry spies, but the flag didn't go with them. The woods people, Charlie and Lee, didn't just go in there as a fake-out though, they took the long

way round and circled to Harry's rear flank. They were halfway there when:

Harry saw that the water wasn't doing anything obvious, and changed tacks.

"Luna, you and Reiko charge at them, see if they're hiding the flag behind Warrick, he's tall enough." That was just a shot in the dark, and both women were faster than Warrick if it came to a footrace.

"Got it, let's go Luna." Luna was chosen to fuddle up Neville, and he let the two pass without comment, he just smiled.

That bothered Harry more than he would care to admit, and he took off at a jog and pointed his wand at the mist.

"Finite Incantatem!" It disappeared, and Sophie's team was revealed. It took Harry a few seconds to realize that something was wrong, and another couple of seconds to figure out what it was.....after he did a count.

"Bugger, they're missing Charlie and Lee. Ron! Fred! Go to the flag now!" Ron and Fred immediately started running off toward the woods, while Harry looked at the others, aside from Drew who was on the other side of the house keeping watch on Angelina, who was keep watch on Drew.

"Charge! Get that flag!" Warrick had disappeared into the woods by now, with Reiko and Luna now running after him, and Harry and the others took off too.....only to be met with the same Earth Ripple Spell that Harry had used so skillfully in the obstacle course. He had taught it to Sophie, who was now using it against him.....well, Sophie and Marie, who had both had the benefit of watching the entire obstacle course event, and it was plain to see that they had learned a lesson or two from it.

Harry and company were knocked to their feet for a second, and then again after they got up. They would have gone down a third time except for the twin fireworks that shot up into the air.....from their

side of The Hollow. Lee and Charlie had hit pay dirt. Reiko and Luna had had Warrick in their sights, and the flag as well since Warrick wasn't backpedaling.....but wasn't really that close.

Harry picked himself up off the ground and looked up at the descending fireworks display, and then at his grinning girlfriend.

"I really was just a hair bit overconfident wasn't I?" Sophie had the class not to rub it in, too much, as Reiko, Luna, and Warrick joined them, the flag still strapped to his back..

"Did you think you were the only one with a plan there dearest? You've been talking about this for weeks, I've had some time." It had not even occurred to Harry, today anyway, to do an end around like that. He had the full frontal assault on the brain and wouldn't let go of it.

"That was a really good plan too, oh my." He couldn't help but start chuckling. He really only competed in three things seriously: duels, Quidditch, and the one-time in the Olympics.....and a fourth, chess, but he never really expected to win there. Chess and poker were the times he lost, though he was getting better at poker.

Charlie and Lee, in full taunting mode for Ron and Fred, came back with the flag raised high. Luna started applauding them as they came into view, and the other second place team members soon joined them. Lee, in his best announcing mode:

"All hail Sophie Weir and her genius plan!" A plan that had taken 20 minutes to make her team victorious.

"Hey, I never said that she wasn't smarter than I was." He was gracious in defeat, and Arthur, not knowing about the Wizards Chess Club and poker with Dobby, thought that losing something might be good for Harry, who seemed to win at everything else. For his own part, Harry vowed to organize a monthly game of this back at Great Lakes, even in a blizzard it would be fun.

There had been no bet or anything laid on, so all that was at stake for the winner was bragging rights, though Harry threw in control of the television and VCR for the remainder of the month as a bonus. Everyone trooped in to hit the showers, their dinner reservation was only a few hours off.

Dinner that night was at Wilton's, a very old restaurant famous for its seafood. It was not normally open on the weekends, and generally asked for more than 24 hours notice, but the restaurant owner's son was one of Arthur's contacts in the muggle Home Office, and a few telephone calls later, they had a 6:00 pm reservation. Everyone living at the house was going, along with Molly, Arthur, Charlie, Remus, and Tonks. Travis and his wife were invited, but he was spending the day with his in-laws, who wanted to be with their granddaughter. The initial highlight was Molly's first muggle taxi ride, they had always taken the floo to King's Cross, which had a hidden floo station at one of the kiosks that wasn't actually a kiosk.

It was a night of excellent food, though no pizza, and fun conversation. Harry ducked a few well placed questions about how much money Rufus had.....well extorted probably is the right word, out of Dumbledore for him, only saying that it was a lot for him, and comparatively a lot less for the old man. He was torn about the whole thing, the more he thought of it. On the one hand, his feud with Dumbledore was still somewhat private, with no attendant violence.....but on the other, he wondered if even the slight chopping down of the old man that he was doing himself and goading Rufus into doing.....was it counter-productive? Whatever Dumbledore's crimes against him, the man was on the correct side of the war. Harry resolved to consider this more in the weeks before the next League meeting. Maybe he could reach out a little, a small gesture could be made.

Remus and Tonks were the focus of much attention, as this was the first real chance that most of them had had a chance to rag on them about their relationship. It turned out that they had been dating for a little over five months, since right after Draco's conversion and the forced move of the Tonks family to a different location. A better location as it turned out because of Tonks' Sirius inheritance, and Remus had been of no small help on that score, as he knew muggle

London very well. There were no wedding plans, despite quite a lot of pressure from Andromeda and Ted Tonks, but the two lovebirds were seriously thinking about sharing Grimmauld Place sometime soon, perhaps at Christmas.

Charlie got some questions as well, as his siblings in particular took advantage of actually having him around. The four of them took turns urging him to come back as soon as possible, then wanting him around at all. After the morning's performance, Harry mentioned that Quidditch wasn't even out of the question, but he saw the suffering look on his surrogate brother's face, and didn't pursue the matter. Charlie assured them that he would have an open mind toward coming back, the fact that he had a job waiting for him surely helped, but that they should not hold their collective breaths or anything of the like. He privately thought that the only thing that would make him leave the Preserve is if he decided that he just had to start dating, something he did miss more and more. Harry thought of introducing him to Professor Maloney in a more formal way, other than a handshake at the twins' graduation, she was single after all. Hmmm.

All told the meal lasted over three hours, and the lead server naturally presented the bill to Arthur, before moving away. Before he passed it to Harry, the eldest Weasley took a look at it, and blanched. Since becoming Head of the Muggle Affairs Office he had become familiar with the galleon/pound exchange rate, and right now he wished he hadn't.

"What's wrong dear?"

"Dear is the right word Molly." He passed the bill to Harry, who just shrugged and silently thanked Rufus Scrimgeour. This was only the second mass restaurant visit for the E-gang, they had visited an American style steakhouse that had opened near The Leaky Cauldron, though various couples dined out at various intervals. He pulled out his wad of muggle pounds and added a nice tip to the bill, which topped the 1,000 pound mark. It was worth it though, the food and service were that good, and Harry made a mental note to come back here during the Christmas Break.

As they were leaving, he motioned Remus to hang back for a minute and walk with him.

“Tell Draco that I’ll meet with him during the Christmas Break, assuming that he behaves between now and then. He needs to demonstrate some more good intentions and deeds, but inform him that I’ll keep an open mind. If he does these very simple things, I’ll meet with him. Without assaulting him as well. I have had enough on my plate this month without dealing with issues about him too.” Which was the unvarnished truth, and Remus acted like he believed him.

“Very well, I’ll tell him that the next time I see him.”

“How often is that?”

“He and his mother attend all of the Order meetings, and I’ve been over there a couple of times as well, to answer more questions by the darling Narcissa.” Tonks covered her mouth to stop the laughing from getting too loud.

“She still not easy to deal with?”

“ Absolutely not, she’s a combination of Black and Malfoy remember? Both times at Malfoy Manor, Draco would take her aside for a talk, then she would come back and be tolerable. Once all of this is over I imagine that she’ll emigrate, I don’t see her being able to deal with us for very long once her Oaths are fulfilled.”

“That would be lovely, maybe she’ll take her spawn with her?” Tonks’ expression said very clearly that she seconded that notion.

“ At least pretend like you’re going to think about forgiving him Harry.”

“I can pretend that Remus, my imagination goes pretty far you know.”

“No kidding, you are your father’s son.”

In truth Harry was willing to deal with Draco the way he had to deal with Dumbledore: Solely because he had to. In fact he couldn't decide what was worse when he had to talk with or about those two: Dumbledore putting him with the Dursleys, or the fact that Draco would have gladly danced on his grave as recently as February. And still might, who knew what the ferret's true feelings were. Still, better to ignore the little ferret until he absolutely had no choice but to talk with him.

The group went for a nice walk afterward, and did some nighttime sightseeing. It certainly wasn't Milwaukee, and while the Americans were on their third trip deep inside muggle London, they still found things to ooh and ahh about. There was just something about a huge city and the atmosphere. The largest city of the colleges that the gang was considering was Los Angeles, it would be an interesting contrast when they went for their visit come December. Harry was no longer as concerned about the price of real estate as he had been 30 hours previously.

Tuesday, July 30, 1997

Ministry of Magic

10:00 am

This was the final day of the tutoring, as everyone involved wanted the kids to have Harry and his Americans' last day totally free to do frivolous things. It was the second day that all of the teenagers were due for tutoring, Molly again holding down the fort in the shop. Today she was joined by Marie and Angelina, the latter of whom was trying to talk her future mother-in-law into a trip to Mongolia come the weekend, lest her twins get into trouble. Molly heard the word 'Mongolia' and quailed, but claimed that she was thinking about it. A lot of Hogwarts stories were told to Marie, and between these two and Ginny, she was quickly getting up to speed on Harry and his adventures.

The last day was about reviewing the high points of what they had learned, as well as feedback from the tutors and for the tutors. It was

not, however, a day for Hermione to be dueling Sophie, as Harry had had a small crisis of conscience and had quietly asked Travis not to do it. The twins were surprisingly okay with this, as they had turned a corner on Hermione as well. Sort of. Reluctantly.

“Eh, she’s alright I guess. She’s done wonders for Ron, and I really mean it this time. I suppose we shouldn’t take delight in watching dear Sophie put her into a wall.” Sophie herself had always been a little dubious about the plan, especially in the last couple of weeks as she and Hermione had spent some time together at The Hollow, repairing fences and building new ones, as reps for Harry and Ron at least.

“George is right, tell Travis not to do it.”

“You guys are all heart. Are you really with me on this? Or are you just giving in for the sake of not arguing about it?”

“Nah, we’re with you. It’s been a good month, no need for it to go out on a bad note or anything.”

“What he said.”

Before any of that could happen though, Harry met with Rufus to discuss plans for the next League meeting. Their conference was about two minutes old when Robert Marr burst into the office.

“I’ve got it!” Rufus’ wand was halfway out of his pocket before he realized who it was, Harry had accidentally left the door cracked open.

“Got what Robert?”

“The Tracking Virus, I’ve reconstructed it!” Fortunately for Marr’s physical health, Rufus had told Harry about the Tracking Virus back in February, otherwise there might have been issues. Marr, when his demons were in check, was normally a very calm person, but Rufus had never seen him this excited, his face was one big smile.

“Is it ready for field testing?” The grin still cemented on his face, Marr nodded his head.

“Yes Minister.”

“Good, good, good. Now all we need is a Death Eater to use it on, and then we’re golden. Good work Robert. Who else knows about this?”

“ Only you and Patrick.....and Harry now obviously.” Patrick Cleburne was the Head Unspeakable, and was senior enough that he was right behind Amos Diggory in the line of succession.

“Let’s leave it that way, aside from Amelia and Travis. Thank you Robert, you do excellent work, and I value it very highly.” That was more praise in one sentence than Fudge usually gave out in a day on the average, and explained why Rufus was far more popular, and far more effective, than his predecessor. Marr was beaming as he took his leave.

“Thank you Minister. I’ll see you in a bit Harry.” He left, and Rufus and Harry stared at each other for a moment.

“What plans do you have for that thing?”

“Well the next Death Eater we catch, or Lucius if he recovers sufficiently, will swallow a pill.” The virus came in pill form.

“Or?” Harry had sensed an ‘or’, and was not disappointed by the reply.

“First, we’ll use it on Dumbledore, I’m sure the pill can be dissolved.” He was already planning on his godson Charles Shepherd doing it. Dumbledore had been taking some kind of medication lately, it would be easy enough to add an extra ingredient.

“You’re not suspicious of him are you? I mean we both loathe him, but.....”

“Oh no Harry, he’s not Death Eater implicated, even I can’t go that far. No, we just need to keep better tabs on him is all. Actually, he’s behaved pretty well since I took over, his non-apology to you notwithstanding. Better to be safe than sorry though, and I would prefer that we not find anything at all.”

“True.”

“Made any large purchases yet?”

“Not quite yet, I want to see how everything shakes out this Fall before I think about that.”

“You’re still set on muggle university?”

“I’ll take a couple of classes to keep my friends happy, but Quidditch will keep me occupied most of the time.”

“Good, you should enjoy yourself for a few years at least. Will I be officiating another wedding anytime soon?” Harry started laughing.

“Well not mine, not next year anyway. Whatever circus the twins come up with I’m sure you would be more than welcome to officiate.”

“That would be something, something very unique indeed.”

“Thanks again for the money though, that was a good idea.”

“It seemed like the best solution at the time. Had any contact with him since?”

“No, the Oaths were delivered yesterday morning to the shop, with no note attached or anything of the like.”

“Do you still have lingering questions for him?”

“Yes, but they can wait for the most part. I’ll still see the bastard once a month at the League meetings, so any time after those are done, if I don’t have Quidditch practice coming hard on the end of them.”

“Well there’s no hurry. Anything you want us to tell Lucius for you when he wakes up?” That was intriguing, and he had a whopper for Rufus.

“Tell him that I slept with his wife.”

Rufus’ shouts of laughter brought his bodyguards running into the room. There was no magical Secret Service, but The Minister did have two low-level Aurors detailed to make sure no one tried a hit.

They immediately surmised that Rufus was just dying from laughter, not from a 16 year old assassin.....well, 16 years old for one more day.

“It’s okay, he just caught me by surprise is all.” The bodyguards grinned for a second, and then took their places right outside the door.....Marr’s burst had caught them unawares too, but everyone knew that he was harmless. Brilliant to be sure, but harmless.

“I’m going to tell him that too, it will be interesting to see how much of his wife that they wiped from his memory.” They shared a laugh, and the meeting broke up a few minutes later. Rufus had other things to do during the day, so he had made a point of stopping in to chat with the kids during their last tutoring sessions the week before, to kind of say goodbye and good luck. Plus he had spent time with most of them at the wedding, sowing his seeds. He would be out of town the next day, and would miss Harry’s birthday party, and had even tried to press a birthday present on Harry, but the younger man would have none of it.

“Minister, you have done more than enough for me this summer as it is. Four million galleons was a lovely present, that’s good enough.” Besides, the invitations for his party had very specifically stated that no presents were to cross his front door. Sophie had ignored him, but

no one had expected her to follow that rule. Rufus had one last warning for him though.

“Just remember your end of the deal, you can’t kill him.....or even choke him, like you did Draco.”

“That was a wonderful day.” Harry always looked back on that particular day with a certain fondness, not only because of the choking, but because he had helped put Umbridge away.....the hag was still alive, but deteriorating rapidly.

“It was highly entertaining, I have to admit it. I’ve seen Star Wars, so I knew what you were talking about. A lot of parallels, The Force and our Magic.” Yes there were, yes there were. Harry soon took his leave, after a final handshake and his promise to be at the next League meeting, which was two weeks from the coming Saturday.

Travis, who was more or less in charge of the tutoring, presided over the meeting, held in the Auror Command’s main conference room. All the students and tutors were there, though Tonks and Pep would be leaving pretty quickly, as they had official type things to get done.

“Before we get into review and feedback mode, I want to say that as far as I am concerned, this experiment has been an unqualified success. I have had no complaints by anybody, and for a Ministry program that’s unheard of except at the most basic levels. Now before anyone asks, I am more than willing to do this again next year, for anyone in the room that’s still interested. Now I know that only Ginny and Luna will still be students, but the offer remains, and we can include your new friend Marie in there as well. One codicil though: The Minister needs to win re-election. As you all know, our elections are coming up in March, and I can’t say whether someone else would go along with this kind of thing.”

It had not really occurred to Harry that Rufus would even be opposed in the coming election, now less than eight months off, but one never knew. It was assumed that Voldemort would put up a puppet candidate, though he had not had a chance to run anyone in 1983, 1988, or 1993, being a spirit and all. Lucius had actually run the last

two times, but that was more to ensure that Fudge was re-elected, making the man look good by comparison. A difficult thing to imagine, but it served its purpose.

Travis continued:

“Okay, first what I would like to do is have all you students tell us all, in a sentence or two, the trick or technique or whatever that you liked best, or that you’ll take back with you.” He pointed at Harry to start things off.

“Well beyond learning to Apparate, I most enjoyed the practice I got in dueling. I learned a lot of cool moves from Travis and Pep, and I’m looking forward to trying them out in the next battle. And I know there will be a next one. I guess you could say that I’m a lot more polished than I was a month ago, and I’m very grateful.” Drew was next to him.

“I would have to say that learning how to walk around in public and not be noticed was my favorite trick. Hiding in plain sight is a lot harder than I would have thought. Thanks Tonks. Oh, and while Jonas never really got asked this question, I know that he was really liking Sarah’s shield instruction. He could never put up a shield worth a damn, it really helped him.” Sarah Westbrook beamed, Jonas had been a tough nut to crack with shields, and she was very pleased to have gotten through to him. Reiko was next:

“I really dug hearing something of what The Unspeakables do, its always been such a secret. I mean it still is, what’s said in The Ministry stays in The Ministry. Thanks Robert.” Warrick followed:

“Rob Graham was the man, learning hand to hand from someone my own size really was the way to go. Not many Wizards get to be our height and weight, without overeating, so that’s what I took from this the most.” And then Neville:

“Learning to Apparate, hands down. My Gran isn’t in here so I can say this: Connie, you are the best teacher I’ve had for explaining things simply and easily. Thank you.” Luna was to her beau’s right:

“I really liked learning about rapid fire kind of spells. Pep is twice my size, and while I did get a crick in my neck looking up at him, I learned so much from his lessons. Thank you.” She seemed totally sincere when she said this, and Mike Peplowski chuckled, he too found Luna to be very amusing. Next to Claudia:

“Well I’m the History lover here, along with my deputy, Harry……so I was really into the Death Eater histories that Lucy Deakins provided. We don’t have people like that back in the U.S., at least they’re not out and out villains anyway. It was a fascinating look at the politics of another country. Thank you.” Ron:

“I really don’t have one thing that stands out, just the atmosphere of the whole thing is what hits me the most. We were here to learn and get some one-on-one instruction, and I never realized how valuable that was until this month. I know I want to thank Harry for thinking of all of this, he was dead right when he ripped Dumbledore for not thinking of it himself.” Nods all around the table at that. Hermione was beside him, and she had some shots to take:

“I want to second what Ron said, we Hogwarts people in the room are in the most danger of anyone in our school, but our Headmaster was too busy to be bothered to help us. Instead he merely wanted to know where we would be, and instead of being happy that we would be living in Fidelius protected home, he seemed irritated. I guess I just want to thank all of our tutors for taking an interest in us, and for sharing your expertise with a bunch of bratty kids. Thank you.” Ginny:

“I really appreciated the Apparition teaching, if you’ll allow me to echo Neville. I too wasn’t eager for Mum to teach me, and Connie was just what I needed. Thank you.” Lee:

“Defense was never really my thing at Hogwarts, shoddy teaching and all that, but Sarah and Rob really helped me a lot. Now if the shop is attacked, I can help defend it a lot better than I could before. Thank you very much.” Fred:

“Well since brother George and I, and Lee, are the most exposed here of anyone, our shop being in plain sight and all, I want to thank

all our tutors for your help. Like Travis said, we picked up something from each of you, and I for one am very grateful.”

“My twin is correct as always. Not counting Flitwick and young Harry here, this is the best teaching we’ve gotten, some might say the only decent teaching, save those exceptions. It helped that we paid attention I suppose, but you inspired us to do that, and that’s no easy task. We’re not sure what next summer will bring, but Travis, we’ll be here with bells on if you’ll allow us to be.” Sophie rounded out the group:

“My best trick would have to be a tie between Tonks and Robert Marr. I never knew what an Unspeakable did before, and now I’m half tempted to try and be one when I graduate. Tonks taking me around Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley was right there with it, it was fascinating to visit another culture’s Alley and be shown around by an expert. Thank you, all of you.”

The collective tutors were all smiling largely, they had gotten a kick out of the whole thing, and more than one of them had gone to Travis and Bones and urged them to do something like this every year. Travis assumed that Ginny and Luna would be in, and was contemplating things for the rest of them. He didn’t tell anyone, save his wife Rebecca, that Harry had beaten him in every formal duel they had contested, and it was getting more and more lopsided with every time, as Harry got more used to not holding back. Bones had floated her idea of Harry taking over the dueling instructor’s position at The Auror Academy, and Rufus claimed that he was considering it.....though he had pointed out that a lot of Harry’s dueling mastery was because of his inhuman reflexes, something that could be honed, but not totally taught.

The seven of them, the tutors and Travis, shared some of their favorite anecdotes of the month. Highlights included Warrick frightening an old woman in Diagon Alley, who had swore at him after he accidentally tripped her. She swore before she saw the size of him, and then immediately Apparated away. Harry’s destruction of Tonks was also told in great detail, and the metamorph took her ribbing with good grace. Sophie and Reiko had gotten a brief tour of The

Department of Mysteries, via Robert Marr, and had talked about it for days afterward, though Harry had politely refused a similar tour, as did the rest of the DOM veterans. Some things were best kept in the deep subconscious.

The rest of the morning was spent getting a tour around The Ministry itself, which the tutoring, outside of Auror Command and the aforementioned Department of Mysteries excursions, had omitted for the most part. Rumor had spread of the Americans though, and people were constantly popping by, wanting to meet them. It turned out that Harry was quite popular in his country's government, and that extended to his friends, of whom people had only really met Ron and Ginny, though everyone knew of Luna's dad and The Quibbler, and the Longbottoms were an old and respected family.

Lunch was a group thing at The Leaky Cauldron, where Harry gave the tutors some presents that everyone had chipped in for.....of course Harry had paid for most of them, but still. Included, for everyone, were:

Season tickets for The Wimbourne Wasps, gotten through their star Chaser, Angelina Johnson. Travis was the lone person not getting this, given that his wife played for the Harpies, he had no interest in sleeping on the couch anytime soon. He would give his tickets to Amelia, though she was Tornados fan.

A nice sized gift bag of WWW merchandise of course, fitted to the tastes and personalities of each instructor, the more so if they had Hogwarts kids, as Lucy Deakins, Mike Peplowski, and Robert Marr did. Filch was just going to love this.

The last gift was the twins idea, though Harry paid for it: Snapple, a case of it for each of them. This was bought from a wholesaler, as WWW was now in the juice selling business. Fred and George assured all the tutors that the bottles were prank-free, and while each of them looked suspicious, they accepted the presents with gratitude.

After lunch, and their farewells to their tutors, the E-gang took the train to Brighton, where Neville's family was having a small party for their scion. Though today was Neville's official birthday, he had been

the first one to suggest that all the festivities and presents be done the next day, to be combined with Harry's. It was the first time any of them, besides Luna and Harry, had been to Longbottom Manor, and Harry insisted that they go by train.

"Hey, I missed my train ride last year, and I won't get one this year either. I'm nostalgic." None of the Americans had been on a train themselves, aside from Marie coming up from France, and everyone thought it was a fun ride. They wandered around the city for a time, before Neville led them to his home.

They met all of the extended Longbottom family, and as they were getting ready for dinner, Ron just had to ask Neville's Uncle Algie something that he had been wondering about for years:

"Did you really drop Neville out of a window to see if he was magical?"

Everyone in earshot started cackling, and Algie looked chagrined enough that they all knew it to be true.

"Well I didn't mean to actually drop him you see, he slipped....." His sister-in-law, the formidable Nora Longbottom, happened to hear this.

"Yes, we always mistook Neville for a greased pig as a child Algie. Still, it did confirm that our boy was magical, however sloppily handled."

"Well I was right then, wasn't I." The look on her face seemed to say 'no you bloody weren't, you git', but she didn't say that out loud. Algie was more or less the man of the house, there were four people total, not counting Neville, who lived there.....but there was no doubt about who was in charge at Longbottom Manor. Algie was also the male Longbottom who had taken the most interest in Neville over the years, one reason that he had dangled the lad out the window in the first place. Frank had been his favorite nephew, and that affection had been translated to Frank's son, Algie himself not having any children. Harry quietly queried him after dinner.

“How are Neville’s parents doing? Is there any hope for recovery?” It was a subject he was reluctant to raise with Neville, who volunteered nothing beyond that he went to see his parents twice a week during the summer and holiday breaks.

“ There is actually Harry, thank you for asking. There’s an experimental potion that they’ve been using on them for the last few months. It hasn’t reversed any of the effects, but it has stopped the decline in each of them. The Unspeakables are working on modifying the potion, called Abatur Poelex, to perhaps begin to reverse the damage. They have nothing concrete yet, but they’re very optimistic.” Neville had never mentioned any of this, but looking back on it later, Harry realized that his friend was not looking as down as he had in the past after visiting them.....he had been allowed to during the school year for holidays.

“That’s terrific, it would be a boon to our world if they could figure it out.”

“ Yes it would, I think that’s one reason Neville latched on to Herbology like he did. I’m sure that he would have taken to Potions if not for the that fool Snape. Harry, I’m sure that Nora has said this to you at some point, but I wanted to add my own: Thank you for taking an interest in Neville over the last couple of years. It’s helped him a lot, and between you and Luna, he’s going to realize his full potential.” Harry always had one point of guilt about that:

“I only wish I had done something like that sooner.”

“You did it soon enough, don’t worry. Try and talk him out of that Quibbler business though, it will send Nora through the roof if she ever finds out.....which may be the idea, though our boy treads very softly there.”

“As do you all.” Algie chuckled a bit.

“Well yes, some fights just aren’t worth it.” Algie and Nora weren’t romantic at all, but the dynamic was much the same as if they were

married. Still, he accepted his role with something that could be called grace.

Wednesday, July 31, 1997

10:00 am

Trunkenstein, Knockturn Alley

It was celebration day, a large party was laid on that evening for Harry and Neville, who were finally turning 17. Neville in particular had been waiting a long time for this, he was getting antsy to do magic legally wherever he wanted to, even with Rufus' backdoor permission greasing the way the last month. Harry and Neville were due to take their Apparition tests at 11:00 am, but first things first. Harry and Drew walked into Trunkenstein, and were relieved to find it devoid of customers. This was the first time Harry had been in the shop, Peter Tyson and the twins had handled the first two transactions.

Anthony Hook was a tall fellow, with white hair in his late 50's. His store was nothing but magical trunks, though the vast majority of them were of the three or four compartment variety, without the living quarters and floo system that Harry's trunk contained. Those small trunks usually ran anywhere from 40-60 galleons, and could hold five to six times what a similarly sized muggle trunk could contain, and were much lighter to boot. Harry's own trunk was the same as the model Hook had sold Alastor Moody, and now he was here to buy some more. Drew was along because while Harry didn't want to go by himself, he also didn't want a crowd of teenagers piling into Knockturn Alley, no matter what time of day. Plus, if there was one person not named Fred or George that he wanted with him in a fight, it was Drew, and one never knew in Knockturn Alley. Everyone else was working in the shop or setting up things at The Hollow, except for Neville, who was having a private breakfast with his grandmother.....he would be coming into some money of his own, a trust set up by his grandfather's grandfather, the first Longbottom to make any real money.

“Is anyone here?!” Harry said this loudly, but without screaming, and Hook himself appeared a few seconds later.

“Well, you’re either Harry Potter or his twin.” Drew gave a brief snicker at the thought of a second Harry Potter running around.

“I am Harry Potter yes, and this is my friend Drew, but we were never in here.” It appeared as though Hook heard words to that effect all the time.

“Of course not, though you already have a few of my products. Your joke shop partners were in here the last time, back in the Fall, your solicitor back in the Summer.” Hook knew full well that his trunk floo system was illegal, and made a point of knowing the real name of all of his customers, for everyone’s safety and peace of mind. And for ‘insurance’ purposes as well.

“Yes they were, and I’m here to make another purchase, one that’s rather larger than the last two.”

“I’m always willing to do business. How many do you have in mind? But first let’s go into the back room, just in case.” Harry and Drew followed him into the back, which was the storage area for the most part. The shop appeared tiny from the outside, but was of course much larger on the inside. Magic you know.

“I’ll take three this time.” Hook just smiled, he made a 300 percent profit on each trunk of that make and model, and he usually didn’t sell three a month, let alone that many in a day.

“I am happy to accommodate your order, but I do have one question.....well more a concern really.”

“Shoot.”

“I have read, and heard much rumor, about your growing friendship and alliance with our Minister. While on the whole I see this as a good thing, I would not want knowledge of the special feature of these

trunks to fall into the ears of The Ministry.” Harry couldn’t blame him one bit.

“Well I haven’t told him, but you really think that they don’t know?”

“I would be in Azkaban right now if they did, every trunk floo I sell is a violation of three different Ministry codes. Maybe a fourth, that one is a grey area.” Rufus had given Harry a copy of said codes, just for reference purposes, and Harry had half a mind to find out what laws he was gleefully breaking.

“This is just between us, and my friends, but they’re not fool enough to blab about it. It’s worked very nicely for me over the last year, and I’m not about to pooch it.” Hook gave the two lads a satisfied smile.

“Excellent, I’m glad to hear that. Three trunks will cost you 5,000 galleons, and you can walk out with them in a few minutes if you like.”

“I would like.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, it was a Gringott’s bank draft for 5,500 galleons, he hadn’t been sure of the exact amount ahead of time, and Dobby was busy with other things at the moment.

“With the change, I would also like as many four compartment trunks as 500 galleons will cover.” Hook thought about that for a second, he wanted to keep this multiple visit customer happy.

“I’ll give you 10 of them for that much, since you’re such a good customer Mr. Potter.”

“My name is Harry, and I can safely say that this won’t be my last purchase here.” Hook was already counting the money in his head, as he collected the trunks, whistling as he went. Harry and Drew shared a look, money really did talk.

One of the three deluxe trunks was going to remain at Godric’s Hollow, so that the twins, Angelina, and Alicia would not have to use portkeys to get to work everyday. Another was to go to the Professors Aylesworth, who were under the nutty notion that Harry was going to

make them pay for it. The last one was being kept in reserve, as Warrick was not keen on the idea of one being in his house back in Indianapolis. He seemed to think that there would be a lot of unannounced visits by his parents, and while he loved them dearly, he wasn't interested in daily communication with them. It would be even worse than that because of his young cousins starting there in September. Likewise Jonas had told him not to bother unless his father requested one, Michael and Barbara Steele were not big travelers in any case. Harry was half tempted to put the reserve trunk in Sophie's room, the two of them would be spending most of their nights in his trunk anyway, and this way there would be no walks of shame. This would bear thinking about.

Hook had the order ready in five minutes, and as Harry and Drew didn't need any explanation about the fingerprint ID, which were on the four compartment models as well, they were out the door soon after. They were going back to the shop, where Neville would meet Harry to floo over to The Ministry for their Apparition Test.

"Since you came with me, you get first dibs on the four-model one that you want."

"Cool, I appreciate it. One question though: You got 10, and there are more than 10 of us, so I was wondering....." Harry had spent the last couple of minutes working that out in his head.

"Well Warrick more or less puts his things in with mine in the big one anyway, and Sophie and Reiko can share one, even they don't have that much stuff, or so they claim. So that's one, then add Jonas, you, Claudia, Marie. That's five, and then the Hogwarts folk are five more. The adults, and I use that term loosely, don't need them, since they don't have to worry about Dumbledore."

"But neither do we, and doesn't that Oath thing preclude snooping?" The written Oaths had been uniformly vague for the most part, and Harry had been half tempted to tattle on them to Rufus.

"No, it mostly dealt with detentions and harassment and the like. According to the Hogwarts by-laws, there's nothing there that says

The Pink can't be used, so I'm looking forward to Dumbledore changing colors. I taught it to Hermione the other day, so they should be set. Even she's hoping that the old man tries something foolish."

"If only we could be there to see it."

"We'll coerce a pensieve memory out of someone if we have to. I fed those five for a month, they owe me one or two." A bit of an understatement, and Drew pounced on it.

"One or two? Ron drank how many gallons of Dr. Pepper?" They both started laughing, as they crossed the unofficial dividing line between Knockturn and Diagon.

"We should have bought it by the barrel. At least I now know what to get him as presents for the rest of his life."

"How many days would he make it back home?" Meaning the States, Harry supposed.

"Let's start in terms of hours first. If he managed to get to one of the Alleys, he'd never leave, muggle Milwaukee would scare the crap out him." They laughed about that, but Drew soon had a serious question.

"Remember that hike we took on my birthday?" Did he ever.

"Where we ran across the Four Tooth Gimmerslammer? How could I ever forget that day."

"The name alone harkens quite a bit. I was wondering though, you said that day that you weren't sure if you would be welcome back here next year, if you chose to settle in Britain. What do you think now that you've had a month back home?" This was why Harry valued Drew, and his answer was more thoughtful than it might have been to his other, non-Sophie, friends.

"You know, I don't think I was exaggerating how I felt then, but I was wrong.....well not wrong, but I don't think I understood how it was

here, and how Dumbledore has fallen a little bit in most peoples' estimations. Rufus and Travis have helped, and having you all here too, not just in the house, but in everyday life. That's why I'm more and more set on keeping this whole thing going for muggle university. I didn't have any friends growing up in Little Whinging, the other kids were always afraid of pissing off Dudley, and at Hogwarts it was mostly just Ron and Hermione.....but now? I like the diversity of our group, we all bring a lot to the table.....I guess what I'm saying Drew, is that any trial can be handled if your friends are with you."

"I know just what you mean, it was kind of weird at first, having a gang of people to hang out with like that."

"That's why I suckered you into it, so I wouldn't be the only one feeling strange." Drew gave his friend a wry smile.

"I knew it had to be something."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes I do, don't worry dude. So coming back here after college is a possibility?"

"It is, who knows what I'll be thinking then. Quidditch is probably going to be in the States though now, the money that Rufus sliced out of Dumbledore ensures that. I wonder if that was his plan?" It certainly could have been, but Drew privately thought that Rufus would want Harry around, assuming that he won re-election. In fact, it was in the back of Harry's mind to strike a deal with whichever American team drafted him, that if they wanted him, they had to sign Ron as well. That was assuming that Ron improved over the course of the coming season, this would bear watching. He was more determined than ever to sneak into Hogwarts territory and watch a game.

Soon enough they reached the shop, and showed off their new hardware to Fred and George, who were beyond delighted that they would be spared the daily portkey roundtrip to get to work. Portkeys were fun every now and again, but twice a day at the minimum

tended to wear on a person. Neville got there a few minutes later, and they flooded to The Ministry soon thereafter, Neville's grandmother apparently decided that she didn't want to make him nervous by coming with them. Harry was glad for that too, there was something forbidding about Nora Longbottom that made him a little nervous as well.

The testing went very smoothly, with both of them passing with flying colors. Ginny and Luna soon joined them, and the two boys waited in the arrival area for their friends to take their tests.

"So I have to ask Neville, is Luna....."

"Is she always so spacey?" Neville sounded like he got that question all the time, and indeed he did.

"Well I would have put it a lot nicer than that.....but I like her 'spacey' so it wouldn't actually have been an insult." From anyone else Neville probably wouldn't have bought that, but Luna always showed him Harry's letters to her, and they bore that out. If anything, Harry's letters tended more to egg her on.

"Yes she is most of the time, but she can be serious when the situation calls for it." Luna had done very well at The Department of Mysteries and the Lucius Malfoy trial.

"So are you going to work for The Quibbler?" The question had been a joke, he hadn't really taken Algie Longbottom seriously on that score, but Neville's answer surprised him.

"Maybe, at first. There is a fellowship in Herbology that I can get, potentially, at The Hancock Institute.....but there are worse careers than creative writing. The trust fund that I got today will make sure that I don't have to worry about where my next meal is coming from." As Harry had been unwilling to divulge the exact amount of that Rufus extorted from Dumbledore for him, he would not ask Neville how much he had gotten.....not that Neville wasn't about to tell him, he could see the curious look on his friend's face.

“It does you credit that you didn’t ask how much, but I got 350,000 galleons. I don’t mind telling you, you did feed and house me for a month.” Harry immediately looked guilty.

“Well that doesn’t mean anything really, I was happy to do it.”

“Besides, you taught me The Pink, that was worth it alone.”

“Well if you really think so. Neville Longbottom, Associate Editor of The Quibbler. I like the sound of it.”

“It does have a certain ring to it. What about you?” Huh?

“Creative writing isn’t my thing really.”

“No you idiot, I mean after Quidditch and university.”

“That’s a long time from now mate, a long time. Apparently the American league is soft enough that I could probably play there 20 years and make good money doing so.”

“You could really stay away from the action like that?”

“Rufus and Travis are both betting that I won’t be able to, but let’s give it some time. Obviously Voldemort needs to be dealt with, but that should happen next summer.”

“Why then? Why not now? That’s what I don’t get, why doesn’t Voldemort come after you right this minute and finish things once and for all?” Harry had an interesting theory on that score:

“He’s waiting for me to graduate, that’s my newest and most logical theory. He’s confident that he can beat me, but he doesn’t want the history books saying that he took out some kid. It’s his foolish pride dictating this more than anything, and it’ll be his loss.” That theory was generated by Harry himself, and Travis had tried for 10 minutes the other day to poke holes in it , but was ultimately unsuccessful.

“That makes sense, I doubt if he’s stupid enough to invade Great Lakes, assuming he could even find it.”

“Yeah, we hid it pretty well this time. Oh yeah, Neville?”

“Yeah?”

“Four million galleons.” Neville gulped, private speculation among the DOM’s had centered on the million galleon mark, but only Ron had even gotten close, reasoning that since Rufus loathed Dumbledore just as much as Harry did, he would really want to stick it to him. Ron did have his intellectual moments.

The two young fellows chatted about more inconsequential things until Ginny and Luna were done, having passed their tests with better scores than either Harry or Neville were able to garner. Still, they all walked back to WWW, they weren’t that confident quite yet, they would practice more once they got back to their homes/school the next day. Waiting for them at WWW was Remus, who was idly chatting with Lee as he waited for them.

“What’s up Remus? Things aren’t starting at The Hollow for another five hours or so.” Remus didn’t believe in beating about the bush, and plunged right in.

“We had the vote this morning on Head Boy and Girl.” He wasn’t smiling, and the four youngsters knew that the results wouldn’t be good. Harry sighed, and asked about Hermione first:

“Hannah Abbot or Padma Patil?”

“Neither, it is going to be Lisa Turpin.” Ginny, as tetchy as her friendship with Hermione occasionally was, showed her outrage immediately.

“She’s not even a Prefect!”

“I know Ginny, and the vote was very close, though I can’t say who voted for whom.....except that I did plead Hermione’s case very strongly. Hannah and Padma were not seriously considered, and Pansy Parkinson wasn’t nominated.” In order to be considered for Head Boy or Girl, or even Prefect, the student had to be nominated and seconded by a pair of faculty members. Dumbledore of course got a vote, and while Filch did not get a specific vote, he was allowed to join the debate if he had anything relevant to say, as did Madam Hooch.

“How often does that happen? A Head Boy or Girl skipping the Prefect part?”

“According to Professor Sinistra, it’s happened once since James, he leapfrogged me in our last year, though non-Prefects are brought up for consideration each year I’m told.. Lisa is tops in the class academically, and I think she’s had one detention in six years, everyone seems to like her. Apparently Flitwick sounded her out about the idea before the end of term, and she was very interested. Dumbledore said nothing during the Head Girl discussion, but since my block of teachers all voted for Hermione, his must have all voted for Lisa. It would have been no trouble at all for him to arrange things ahead of time, and his loyalists have more than enough votes to carry the day.” Harry dearly hoped that Hermione had thought about this beforehand, and that he had decided that the tutoring was worth the loss of Head Girl. Neville interrupted Harry’s musing.

“So who’s Head Boy?” It was clear that it wasn’t going to be Ron.

“Ernie MacMillan won on the first ballot. We did Head Boy second, and they prefer not to have the Head Girl and Boy from the same House, so Anthony Goldstein would only have gotten it if there were no other serious candidates. He probably would have won the vote if we had gone with Hermione or one of the others for Head Girl. Ron was talked about, but it was felt that he had enough on his plate for the time being, though his upward grades were noted. If he had started that improvement a year earlier, he might have had a better chance, but it was agreed that Ernie was the safe choice. I did vote for Ron, but I agree that he’s probably better off not having the job.

Plus, it would not do his relationship with Hermione any good if he were elevated and she were not.” Oh my yes, and that line of reasoning had not occurred to Harry, though it had to the other three.

“Your votes are confidential Remus, we won’t reveal to anyone outside the family of course.”

“I appreciate that Neville, and I assumed as much. I just wanted to be the one to tell them personally, instead of them getting it in a pair of letters.”

“You want to do it now?”

“I would, though I can’t stay long, I have some paperwork to do back at the castle for a few hours before I come back.” No one seemed to mind Remus’ job as de-facto messenger for Dumbledore, as The Headmaster would surely have figured on something such as this happening.....and indeed he did, Ron and Hermione did not wind up getting owls announcing the decisions, as the other students involved did. Ginny had no burning desire to be Head Girl when her time came, but she was still disappointed a little bit that she would have no shot at it now. Luna, ironically, was in the same position as Lisa Turpin, being tops in her class without being a Prefect.....but Luna as Head Girl was more than a stretch.

“Let’s go then.”

The five of them took the portkey ride to The Hollow, the last of the summer, as it turned out, for the four students. Remus broke the news gently to Ron and Hermione, and was mildly shocked to learn that they had anticipated the rejections and were fine with it on the whole. Hermione’s reaction summed it up:

“We knew this was going to happen when the five of us had that meeting with him, when he asked what our summer plans were. I hadn’t made up my mind about all of this at the time, nor had Ron, but I knew that that losing Head Girl would be a cost to factor in if I took Harry’s offer. I did it with my eyes open, and I have no regrets.” That was something coming from her, Hermione had probably been

dreaming of being Head Girl since her first week at Hogwarts. Ron's reaction was similar, if worded much differently:

"I knew I didn't have much of a chance even before this, but this stuff was so worth it that I don't care. Ernie will do fine, I don't begrudge him anything, he was with us in the DA from the start too. Better him getting Head Boy than Theo Nott." Ron and Nott actually got along for the most part, in what little communication they had with each other. This was great helped by the fact that Voldemort had instructed Theo that his orders about laying off the DOM's were still in place. Theo had privately targeted Ron as a potential convert, and had been slowly attempting to ingratiate himself with his putative rival. All to no avail apparently, but it would continue in the months to come.

Relieved that they seemed to be taking it so well, Remus soon departed to get his paperwork done, if that's what he was really going to be up to. The party was mostly to be outdoors, Harry and Neville both liking how the outdoor wedding had gone. Luna had worn the others down with her idea for candles being the primary lighting, so two department stores had practically had their candle section bought out, though they were not to be lit until the party was already going.

The guest list was mostly Hogwarts folk, both living at The Hollow and people who roomed with Hollow members, aside from Luna's and Ginny's. Dean still wasn't back yet, he was currently in Singapore, but Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender were all due to attend, as well as the other members of the Rogue DA not named Draco, which included the brothers Creevey and the now graduated Katie Bell, who had been a first round pick of Puddlemere United, joining Oliver Wood, who came with her. Whether it was date for the two old and new teammates was open to question, though both had been specifically invited.. No one else from Hogwarts had been summoned, the feeling being that the Americans didn't need to be exposed to too many new people on their last night in town. The tutors had not been invited, beyond Tonks and Travis, as there had been a sense that it was not wise to advertise the scope of what had been going on for the last month. Enough word had leaked out that it was going on at all, but that was enough, as Travis had explained to Harry and the other tutors when the subjected had been broached at the goodbye lunch.....Harry had been more than willing to damn the rumors

and have the other tutors over, but he deferred to Travis on that. It turned out that The Weird Sisters had been booked by their manager to play a gig in Rome, Italy that night, so while Bill and Fleur heard them play this night, none of the rest of them were able to.

Seamus and company arrived at 5:00, Lee having collected them as he closed the shop early. They were impressed with The Hollow, and were somewhat surprisingly cordial to the Americans. Though why it was surprising was a question. Harry just figured that they might think: 'Oh, so these are the people you abandoned us for?' But it wasn't like that at all, and everyone seemed to get along just great. Sophie and Parvati, who was dating the absent Terry Boot from Ravenclaw, shared a laugh about her being Harry's first date.

"When they write Harry's new history, you'll be famous." Parvati looked mocked panicky at hearing that.

"Oh Merlin no, then they'll have to know what a terrible dancer he was." Harry was just in earshot.

"I heard that!" Sophie continued on as though he had not said a word.

"He can be called 'decent' now."

"He was just nervous about dancing in front of Cho."

No, Cho was not there, but that was more of a function of Ginny not wanting Michael Corner at the party. Harry felt that it might be a good thing for his first erstwhile crush to see him with his almost year-long girlfriend, but he had given in to what Ginny wanted. The only Ravenclaw at the party was Luna, and it was probably a good thing that Lisa Turpin wasn't present, or Hermione might have said something.....not that it was Lisa's fault of course. Likewise Ernie MacMillan and his Hufflepuff friends were not there, though that was more a function of the list having to be cut off somewhere.

Warrick and Ron immediately started grilling Oliver and Katie about professional Quidditch. Warrick, after being around Harry for a year,

and Ron now for a month, had to admit that the taste was now in his mouth about perhaps going professional. He had seen how John Geyser had just signed for \$135,000 a year to play in Malaysia, and Warrick honestly did not believe that his former Captain was that much better than he was. He fit the size requirements for playing Beater as a pro, and he had a ton of experience. So he listened intently while Ron peppered Wood with questions.

Oliver barely knew Ron, except as Harry's best mate during their three years at Hogwarts together, but the younger man was playing his position.....and had won one Quidditch Cup more than he had, though Oliver's chances had twice been sabotaged by Dumbledore's shenanigans.....shenanigans that Harry would gird himself to tell his former Captain about before the night was over with. He answered Ron's queries as best he could, and was even conned into coming over to The Burrow to give him some Keeper pointers, after Ron appealed to his Gryffindor pride.

"But we've now won three Cups in a row Oliver, we have to keep that going at least another year right?" At least was right, Ron was going to be the only Seventh Year on the team unless Dean followed through on his threat to try out, so the Gryffindors would have at least six starters back after Ron left. For her part, Ginny was all set, she had ordered brother Charlie to appear in the Weasley Quidditch field the next morning to put her through her paces. She was not the natural Seeker that Charlie or Harry was, but her Snitch instincts weren't far behind, and she had played five matches at Seeker to Harry's eight, so she wasn't that far behind in experience either, despite a comparatively later start.

Everyone obeyed the no presents edict, except for Sophie and Luna. Luna got Neville a set of Star Wars and James Bond movie posters, a dozen in all, for his dorm room and room back home. Bill had been the big help in getting them, as one of his friends was a big movie buff too, and that friend, Roger Cross, took Luna around one afternoon to find what she was after. Neville was very pleased, he was already talking about getting his own place in muggle London after graduation, where electronics could be modified so that he could indulge in movie watching whenever he wanted. He was repeating

this even now to anyone who would listen. Luna heard this again, and just rolled her huge eyes, muttering about creating a monster.

Sophie, knowing how pointless it was to buy anything for Harry, had commissioned a special painting by Winky, who had been diligently working on it in her spare time.....she had rather less spare time than in most months, but she still managed to finish it with about six hours to spare, which gave it just enough time to dry. She levitated it outside, fortunately it was not raining or especially humid, and took the shroud off of it to show the birthday boy.

It was a painting of Lily, James, and Harry. Lily and James had been aged by Winky to look as though they were in their mid-30's, the age they would be today. Harry looked like he did now, mussed up hair, glasses and all. Winky unveiled it right before Dobby brought out the cake.

Winky really did have talent, because Remus, the one at the party who had known Lily and James the best, fainted dead away, and it took a long time to revive him too. Travis finally woke him up, but even he was a little shell shocked, as was his wife Rebecca, the only one present who had been taught by Lily. They got Remus to his feet, and Travis muttered out of the corner of his mouth:

“Do we really look that old Remus?” That brought Remus out of his amazed stupor, he found it hard to believe that he was the same age as his old friends.....or maybe it was because he was the only one left alive.

“Older Travis, we’ve each had some trials over the last decade and a half.” Travis smiled, he had always looked older than his years for some reason.

“I really need to get some house elves like Dobby and Winky.”

“I know just what you mean.” Many times Remus had kicked himself for not hiring those two himself, they would probably have worked for a lot less than Harry and the twins paid them.

Harry had no clue of what to say, he just walked up to the medium-sized painting and stared at it.

“Wow.” He kept repeating that over and over again, as various Weasleys were whispering to Seamus and his people about just who those people were in the painting. Sophie could tell that he liked it, and walked up to him and took his hand.....he was standing really close to it now.

“Harry?”

“It’s amazing.”

“I was hoping it would be something you’d want. I got the idea from looking through your photo album.”

He responded by pulling her into a tight hug.

“Thank you, it’s the perfect gift.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“It’s a lot better than a comic strip book set.” That’s what he had gotten her for her birthday back in March. She giggled.

“I loved that gift, don’t start Mister.”

“And I love you Sophie, very much. Thank God I fled to America.”

“Happy Birthday Harry, I love you too.”

It was a lovely moment, and everyone in the front yard saw the two of them as the perfectly matched couple. Even Ginny, with one more relationship under her belt than Harry, admitted to herself that she never would have thought of a present like that. Claudia and Reiko were both thinking about what a long way their girl had come. It was just a year ago the day after tomorrow that they had all met Harry, the start of them being drawn into his life, with its attendant problems and

positives, sometimes all at the same time. The two had talked it over many times, and while they were still keeping an eye on Sophie, they knew that Harry had proved himself to be the best thing that had ever happened to her.....well, tied with her being magical, everyone agreed that there was no topping that.

Winky was hailed as the next great artist of the 20th Century, and after receiving high praise from Harry, she fled to the kitchen and would not speak again for the rest of the evening. She was very pleased, however, that her painting had gone over so well, she just hated being the center of attention for even a few minutes. So Dobby was forced to be her representative, which was good, because he loved attention in all forms.....it was worth noting that he was probably the most popular person/elf in Cortez House, hands down. He revealed that Sophie had thought of the painting idea on the second day at The Hollow, and had spoke to Winky about it that very night, supplying the little elf with the canvas and paints necessary to do the gig, having gotten a wage advance from Fred and George, the only others in the house who knew about it.

Harry hustled the painting back inside, all the while looking up at the non-existent clouds to make sure that a downpour wasn't about to happen in the few seconds that the trip took him. Fred and George followed him, and made a surprising one minute plea to keep the painting in The Hollow permanently, rather than the obvious move of Harry taking it with him wherever he went, Great Lakes for the next 11 months, then so on and so on. They felt that since James and Lily, who they of course never met, were a part of Godric's Hollow, that's where their memorial should remain.

Harry was impressed by the sentiment, but as soon as the double act paused to take a collective breath, he vetoed the idea as silly, a waste of a perfect painting, and probably a huge insult to his beloved Sophie as well. That didn't stop George though.

"Okay, we'll grant you the last part. How about we speak with her about it?" Harry looked horrified at the idea.

“Hell no! Sorry, scratch that: Bloody Hell No!! If you do that she’ll think that I considered it, and I will not have it. Get Winky to do a painting for you guys if you want, but you’re not having this one.” Winky, who now had WWW, Harry’s dorm room, and The Hollow on her cleaning agenda, would not have as much time for painting as she had. She might even have to work 30 hours a week during the school year. Harry and the twins really were slave drivers. Fred held up his hands in surrender.

“All right Junior, don’t burst a blood vessel, it was just an idea.” Harry grinned at them.

“It really is a great painting isn’t it?”

“The aging of Lily and James was a nice touch I thought. Happy Birthday little brother.” The three of them put their arms around each other in a kind of rugby circle, only standing straight up.

“Yeah, you made it to 17 years old, who would have thought?”

“A lot different than my party last year isn’t it? We’re not hiding out in London this time.”

“No, we’re hiding out in Wales.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes we do, now get that masterpiece into your trunk so we can start eating cake.”

“Too bad there aren’t any garden gnomes to share it with.” The three of them started giggling like crazy, as they all walked the painting up to the trunk, where Drew could look at it later on, being the sole resident in there for one more night. There were no garden gnomes in this part of Wales for some reason, and believe it when you’re told that everyone had done some looking on the subject over the course of the month. The sight of the gnomes eating cake would

be talked about for years, especially due to the dozen photos Winky got of them doing it.

They got back outside just in time to stop a riot over the delay in cutting the cake. It was strawberry-coconut, which was Neville's favorite. He had picked the menu as well, maintaining that at least one meal at The Hollow needed to be free of pizza. For some reason the cake was eaten first, and the sucker was all gone after about 10 minutes too. Then it was on to the main course, which was only fitting.

So they had fish and chips, and hamburgers and chips. Not quite Wilton's from the other day, but easy to produce in mass quantities. Dobby had his chef's hat on and was having a high old time on the brand new grill that the twins had sprung for. Everyone was eating hearty and enjoying themselves, as Harry made a point of spending some time with the newcomers, who he hadn't seen in over a year.

The Head Boy and Girl selections were dissected, and surprisingly enough, the angriest people in the bunch were Lavender and Parvati. It seemed that being with Ron, and perhaps having less Harry-centered drama, had loosened Hermione up enough that she and her roommates were now pretty good friends, after five years of strained at best relations. They had come to accept Hermione for what she was, and each of them told Harry that they would send a letter of protest to McGonagall.....a letter only after Harry asked them nicely not to send any Howlers. He explained to them a very edited version of his settlement with Dumbledore, and that the settlement precluded any Howlers from him or his associates.. He had no idea how he was going to enforce that, but four million galleons was a nice incentive to keep asking his friends not to. He had been prepared to bribe the two of them with WWW stuff, but they agreed before he could get a chance.

It turned out that Witch Weekly, which neither the twins' group nor the DOM's read on a regular basis, had written a couple of articles about Harry's American friends, both flattering, so Parvati and company had some conversation starters. They were getting along so well that Harry was starting to have pangs of regret about not trying to be better friends with them all. Even the Creeveys, who arrived sans any camera equipment, seemed to be pretty cool. Maybe absence really

did make the heart grow fonder. This would bear thinking about, or so he decided at the time.

It was getting toward the end of the party when Oliver and Katie took Harry aside.

“Harry my boy, please tell me that you’re coming back here to play with us professionally. The American Quidditch League is not up to your standards, or the standards of any decent British player. You belong back here with us, especially if you want to play in the 2002 World Cup.” Though he and Oliver would not be teammates there, Oliver being Scottish and all.

“Well I would love to do that Oliver, but it’s not so simple as picking the best competition.” The word ‘Sophie’ was felt but unspoken at this point, and Oliver nodded as if he had thought of that very thing.

“You can portkey back and forth, especially if you pick a university on the East Coast.”

“You’ve really been thinking about this haven’t you? Or are you talking to me on behalf of your league?” Wood looked a bit abashed, but plunged on.

“I have no instructions per se, they don’t know that I’m here of course. But they do know that I’m your former Captain, and aside from Angelina, probably the person in our league who knows you best and would have the most influence with you. I’m here tonight as your friend of course Harry, and I was very glad to be invited. But I would be remiss if I didn’t try to recruit you a little.” Harry had missed this about Oliver, the man was so earnest in saying what he wanted. John Geyser, much as Harry had liked him on a personal level, just didn’t have that way about him, the way that made you want to fly through a wall if that’s what was asked of you. He doubted that Warrick would be like that either. It just proved that Captains aren’t grown on trees. Ron was likely to get the Gryffindor Captaincy, and Harry anticipated having a morbid fascination with Ginny’s evaluation of her brother the Captain, via Dobby post.

“Oliver, I appreciate the sentiment, and I have to tell you that while I haven’t made up my mind.....hell mate, I just don’t know. I have eight months to the day to decide, and I’ll probably use up every one of those days to figure it out. I promise you that I’ll meet with you again before I make any final decisions.” Oliver looked surprised.

“I didn’t know that you came over here during the school year?” If you only knew, thought Harry.

“I didn’t last year, aside from a couple of times during the Christmas Break, but this school year I’ll be back once a month for Dark Force Defense League meetings. I’ll just arrange to stay a little later after one of them and we can talk then. Bring your general manager with you if you want to.” Harry had already made the same offer to Angelina, to get the Wasp’s GM in a meeting, but the result had been an unexpected ‘no thank you’. The Wasps owner, while not a Death Eater, was more in sympathy with Voldemort than he was with Harry and his side of the war. He didn’t mind that Angelina was friends with Harry, but he was not willing to have The Boy Who Lived on his team.

“Good, I’ll make sure that we’re there. I knew about you and the DDFL, but not that you would have to come back every month.”

“My close friend Augustus McCrae didn’t divulge all the details then, good.” Will wonders never cease. The twins did read The Daily Prophet, a paper in which they, by necessity, also advertised in.....so they made sure that Harry found out about any mention of him in there.

At the end of the night, a very loud rendition of Happy Birthday was sung, and Neville and Harry both made speeches that were astonishing in their brevity. Well not so astonishing when you learn that Luna and Sophie had forced them to say something to their guests en masse.

Neville:

“Thank you all very much for coming to our party. It’s nice to celebrate coming of age with good friends like you.”

That was it, and Harry was startled enough that he didn't know what to say at first. He recovered after a few seconds.

"I'm glad that all of you are here to be with Neville and I to help us enjoy our initial moments of being 17. Our first few years were kind of rough.....okay, our first 16 years, but we've muddled through, thanks in no small part to friends like you."

Not bad, considering that he made it up as he went along. For all his fame, Harry was no public speaker. He dreamed of many things for his future, but making speeches was not among them.

Everything finished a little before midnight, and Travis and Remus took the non-Hollow people out by portkey. Warrick suggested that they all throw their bedrolls in the living room and have a mass slumber party type thing, and everyone thought that was a great idea. As they were doing so, Harry took a last night-time look at his front yard. Sophie snuck up behind him and poked him. Harry had been so contemplative that he was startled and jumped a few inches.

"You're like a ninja when you do that."

"I'm the only one who can sneak up on you like that."

"Well I know you won't kill me." That earned him a slight swat on the arm.

"That's a plus in our relationship."

"A year on Friday."

"That was the day we met, yes. We made our first date the next day."

"We started a year ago Friday darling, the next days were just waiting." Harry remembered every detail.

"Yes dear. What were you thinking about when I snuck up on you?"

“Just how great this month has been. I mean it’s been hard work at times, some arguments and fights, but overall its been great.”

“It has been, it’s worked really well. It was a great idea that you had.” He had to admit as much.

“The best I’ve had all year probably, except for one.” Sophie contemplated that one for a few seconds.

“What idea was better?”

“The vest.” The one that had saved two lives.

“Ah yes, too bad its too big to fit me.”

“You need to grow another inch.”

“I’m fine how I am, at least I don’t to look too far up at you?” He laughed, the one benefit he had to being short.

“Thank goodness you don’t wear heels.” She didn’t even own a pair, preferring flats when she had to dress up, which was not all that often. Sophie’s dress style was usually very casual. When not in her school uniform, she wore faded jeans and a variety of t-shirts and button-downed shirts for the most part.

“You are the lucky one there. We can come back here anytime we want you know, all it takes is some floo powder.” The real question was spending the night, and what would happen if another invasion-style emergency happened while they were gone. That was the main reason that they had yet to spend a night at Isla de Marauder since Christmas Break. Harry knew that Murray didn’t keep very close tabs on him, unless there were Surveillance Charms that evaded his scans.

“It won’t be the same though, but we’ll manage. It’s only one more year of school, and we can do this again next year if we all want to.”

“I don’t know of anyone that would object.”

“Most of us will be out in the world, only Ginny and Luna will be left in school, with current boyfriends graduating.”

“ I feel sorry for them already, being left in that school by themselves.” It was true, as Ginny didn’t get along with her own roommates much better than Luna did, though heaven help them if they tried to mess with her things..

“They’ll be fine, the war will be over by then, and Dumbledore won’t be so bad, assuming he survives the end of it.” Who would make him not survive it was the question that Sophie chose not to ask him. She had been hard pressed not to curse Dumbledore herself during the meeting in The Burrow, but she had assumed that Harry and/or Rufus had something in mind.

“I have an idea, let’s come here after Thanksgiving. We’ll do the Thursday part in Indiana and Oklahoma, then come here for the rest of the time.....well, here and Isla de Marauder.” She liked saying the full name.

“Sounds like a plan. November is a long way off though, all those classes. I’m getting edgy already.”

“You poor dear.”

“No, I’m not poor, not after the Rufus Scrimgeour extortion plan.” He said that in jest, as uncomfortable though it made him feel now and again.

“You really think you might be Dumbledore’s heir?” It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility, but Harry shook his head.

“No, I’m assuming he’s leaving it all to Hogwarts, the place could do with some fixing up.” They went back inside to the slumber party soon after, and one last showing of Independence Day. Ron and Neville

would soon go through movie withdrawal, but they would get over it, for the most part.

Thursday, August 1, 1997

The Hollow

Noon

Moving day. Has a not pleasant ring to it, and for our players it really did. Hermione, Luna, and Neville were going back to their individual homes, while Ginny and Ron were repairing back to The Burrow. Harry had told them that they were all welcome to stay until The Hogwarts Express did it's thing, but they had all demurred. It wouldn't have been the same without Harry and their new friends, and Hermione was still wary of being in a Gred and Forge run house. The portkey set was all ready, and the now seven members of the gang were all procrastinating about leaving. All of their stuff was piled into Harry's trunk, and Warrick was detailed to hang on to it.

Harry had ultimately decided that as much as he liked Marie, it was just too soon to let her know about the trunk floo. Warrick had been the voice of reason on this one, reminding him that he had made Drew wait for months before telling him, four and a half to be exact, and that Marie was still not totally an insider quite yet.....though she and Drew were now officially a couple, and if she snuck down to the trunk that she was now keyed into.....well Harry would ask no questions. He made a mental note to vet Marie's friends before he did anything with the trunk floo or the Map 2.5, she mostly hung around with her roommates, whom Harry barely knew except to say hello.....though he had seen two of them naked, as they were dating Rick and Terry, who weren't always as diligent as they could have been in pulling the bed curtains down. Every once in awhile Warrick would make a point to stop and watch the action, just to try and embarrass the couples. Didn't work really, but he would get a nice show out of it.

The gang was due to make the mostly the same portkey journey that Jonas had done: Wales to Dublin to Reykjavik to Greenland to Halifax to Boston.....whereupon they would split up. Marie would be taking

the floo back to Cincinnati, with Drew going to visit his mother in Boston. The rest would be on their way to Great Lakes, with Reiko and Warrick having their parents come by school come the weekend, so that they could get a chance to spend some time together.....and so that Harry could give the Professors Aylesworth their trunk.

They all stood on the front lawn, the DOM's to portkey to the shop, the gang to start on to Dublin. Handshakes and hugs dominated for a few minutes, as the DOM's all varied on one theme:

“Thank you for this Harry, it was really wonderful.”

Harry was very happy to hear all of that, and over the month he had really come to regret that none of the DOM's had taken him up on his Great Lakes offer. He missed Ron's goofiness, Hermione's logic, Ginny's steadfastness, Neville's perspective, and Luna's day in day out craziness.....and a lot more. He had a sneaking suspicion that Hermione would take him up on the muggle university offer though, and he made a resolution to keep at her about it.

Harry gave Hermione a last hug, and whispered to her.

“I'll see you guys in a couple of weeks after my League meeting. Take care of them will you?”

“You bet Harry. Be safe.” They disengaged and Harry repeated this with Ginny and Luna, with the same message, as all three Hogwarts women had different strengths to add to the collective, a collective that they more or less ran. He shook hands with Ron and Neville, and was getting to the point where he might get a little misty eyed, but Hermione saved him by motioning to them to get going.

The five DOM's grabbed on to their portkey, the only one left that they knew about, and Ron did the honors.

“Activate!”

And they were off. Harry took one last look at his house.....a house that he could visit every day if he felt the urge, and said in a half choked up voice:

“Well let’s go then, before I send Dobby to Professor Murray asking for another two weeks.” The seven of them grabbed on to the jump rope, and seconds later they were landing in the portkey area in magical Dublin. Dublin, for some reason, was a big tourist spot for magical folk, despite Ireland’s relatively small magical population, so their Knockglen Alley was rather large. No time for sight-seeing though, much as they would have liked to have poked around. After a 15 minute rest, they were on the way to Iceland.

The total journey to Boston took two hours, 99 percent of that being the mandatory rest stops, younger people couldn’t be too careful with portkey travel. They parted ways with Drew and Marie in Boston, the two of them deciding that now was as good a time as any for Marie to meet Hollie Baylor.

“Thanks for having me over for the week Harry, it was a wonderful end to my vacation.” She gave him a quick hug.

“You’re very welcome Marie, I’m glad you’ve become a member of our little circle. Good luck with Mother Baylor.” Little did she know that Drew’s sisters Hannah and Heather were visiting this day. Poor Marie. She would do fine though, and floo back to Cincinnati that evening with only a few scorch marks on her.

The rest of the gang, now shrunken to the same five as last August, arrived in Murray’s office right on schedule. She was meeting with Heyman as it happened, and the two of them got a start as the floo from Hollie Baylor’s office deposited them into hers.

“Well, our British travelers are back. How was it?” Harry dusted himself off and smiled at the two of them.

“It was wonderful ma’am, we had a lot of fun and learned even more.”

“Right.” Warrick.

“We did indeed.” Reiko.

“I agree with Harry.” Sophie

“He speaks the truth.” Claudia.

“That’s all so Stepford Wives of all of you. I didn’t read anything in The Chronicle about any incidents, were they right?” That word covered a very broad spectrum, and Harry attempted to narrow it somewhat.

“Um, well, define ‘incidents’.” Murray sure had something in mind:

“I assume I would have heard about it if you had killed anyone?” Heyman couldn’t help himself anymore and started to chuckle, while Murray just gave Harry an ironic smile.

“I assume you would have too. No, there were no fights, other than verbal ones. I have some Brit-American conflict per our deal, but it only qualifies if you see me as part American.”

“How was Dumbledore?”

“Very, very complicated, but ultimately our differences have been put aside for the time being.”

“You’re watching too many courtroom dramas Harry.”

“They’re my weakness, I don’t mind admitting it. No, a lot happened, and I’m at your disposal for when you want to hear about it.”

“Fair enough, there’s plenty of time. Why don’t you guys go unpack, lunch will be starting in a little bit.”

“Good, I’m starving.” Nods all around, they had eaten breakfast but nothing else, wanting to force themselves to be back on Michigan time.

The shrunken gang went back to their rooms, and when Warrick and Harry got there, Warrick paused.

“You know, this is my last year in this room, it’s been a long time dude.”

“There’s still a long time to go mate, 11 months. One last Quidditch season, another Olympics. NEWT’s.” Warrick grimaced.

“You were going great until you brought that last part up.”

“Sorry to be a damper on your reflecting.” He wasn’t really, and Warrick just laughed and opened the door. Rick and Terry never stayed in the summer session, especially now that they were old enough to do magic outside of school. Indeed there were fewer Seniors than any other class in the Summer session, not counting the Novices of course, who had just gotten their letters. Keisha and Marty had gotten theirs, and Warrick had already been informed via Dobbygram that the kids would be doing their Flackter Alley visit at the same time as the gang.

The rest of the day was spent getting used to things again, and Harry was really regretting that he had agreed to only one month at The Hollow. He was already feeling cramped by the few places to go in school, one of the things he had always preferred about Hogwarts, you could always wander around there and find new places you had never seen before.

He gave a full report at dinner to Murray, Heyman, and Greenleaf, with Lyman and Ziegler joining them part way through. It was not widely known among the other students about the tutoring, so dinner that night was in Murray’s office, which did nothing more or less than clue the other students to the fact that something must have happened in Britain, as they did all know where the gang had been. The retelling of the Dumbledore meeting was the highlight though,

and while Harry did not allow a pensieve memory of it to be shown, he did acknowledge that there was some money involved.

As they left, Ziegler stopped Harry, who motioned for the others to go on without him.

“So are you really going to eschew Advanced Muggle Studies?” This was the third year in the row that the Regular class ‘champion’ had refused the promotion, and the fifth out of the last six.

“That’s the plan, I haven’t really heard many good things about Professor Mendoza.” Ziegler was a bearded man, which mostly hid the twitch of a smile that flashed over him. He and Mendoza got along very well, the older man couldn’t care less whether the students didn’t want him as a teacher.....though he was not abusive, like Snape. He was just boring, a solid form of Binns who was too set in his ways to change. Murray left him alone for the most part, though he showed no signs of imminent retirement.

“He is very knowledgeable about our subject.”

“I’m fine where I am. Are we still set for the tutoring tomorrow?” Harry had signed up for Summer tutoring in History, again, and Muggle Studies, the arrangements being made before he had left in June. He had two years plus of muggle state and local government studies to catch up on, though he had periodically paged through Ziegler’s lecture notes for those areas when he had spare time.....which meant that he was done studying but Sophie wasn’t..

“We are, you have the first slot after lunch, and at the same time on Tuesdays as well.” So nothing in the morning, as Harry had not known the times before now. Lyman would tell him later that he was slotted for Monday and Wednesday at 3:30 pm, so Thursdays off and nothing before lunch. A nice relaxing month for young Harry, who had been working pretty hard so far this summer.

“Cool, I have some more of the Outer Monologue Gum for you, they’ve modified it so that it works in a hard candy as well.”

“Glad to hear it, I’m going to try it out in my first few classes. Kind of like subtitles on a movie. How much do I owe you?” Harry shook his head in the negative, though it wasn’t a case of being overly generous or of bribery.

“Nothing, you’re a combination of a beta-tester and advertiser for it, so the first supply of the new stuff is free. It goes on the shelves come Monday, we’ll see how it sells in Diagon Alley before I really try to push it here.” Ziegler knew better than to argue, and appreciated the consideration.

“Who are you thinking about to take over for you here after you leave? You must have someone in mind.”

“Let’s see what Warrick’s cousins are like on a daily basis, they start here next month as Novices. Otherwise, I’m thinking about my friend Nan Mahon right now. She’s starting Apprentice Year, so she’s young enough to be able to do it for a couple of years at least.” Nan took Muggle Studies, and the divorced Ziegler was careful not to have a visible reaction to the name.

They parted ways, and a whipped Harry.....not that kind of whipped.....fell asleep almost as soon as he got to his room, the time difference really kicked his rear. He awoke 14 hours later, by himself, refreshed and ready to do not much of anything at all.

The next night Harry and Sophie celebrated their one year anniversary with a candle-lit dinner for two inside the trunk. Warrick, Reiko, and Claudia congratulated them heartily, even after Harry threatened their lives if they so much as got near the trunk until Saturday morning. They took him seriously enough that no pranking ensued.....helped by the fact that Harry had instructed Dobby to let them nowhere near the Map 2.5, just in case.

The Forrester/Aylesworth visit went off without a hitch on Saturday, all of them glad that no Dark Wizard drama had occurred during the sojourn at The Hollow. It turned out that the two families and Michael Steele had kept in closer touch than usual during July, just in case they would be needed to go over there. They spent the afternoon at

Great Lakes, their first visits in years, or almost two decades for Karen and Martin Forrester, who were graduates of the place and had had no need to check up on their only child. Warrick and Harry received their instructions for the Flackter Alley trip, and the prime one seemed to be:

“Keep Marty and Keisha out of trouble.” Karen didn’t want her sisters on her back about it. Harry didn’t mind the babysitting per se, he was sure that there was fun to be had there, but had to ask one thing:

“Um, Karen? What are our rules of engagement?” Martin and Warrick both started snickering, as Karen pondered that for a moment, trying unsuccessfully to fight off a smile.

“Well Stupefy them if you have to, but try not to if you can help it.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good boys, I know you won’t let me down.”

Later on, Harry took the Professors Aylesworth aside and explained the trunk features to them, and how to lay out the fingerprint ID. He had already keyed himself and the rest of the gang into it, just in case, and Karl and Lisa declined his offer to remove them, saying that of course all the gang was trusted. When Karl started to take out his wallet, where a bank draft rested, Harry stopped him.

“Nope, sorry, your money is no good here.” Both adults started shaking their heads, and Lisa tried to convince him otherwise.

“No Harry, I insist that you take the money. You may be rich, but we’re not exactly poor ourselves, we can afford this.” Plus they didn’t need to spend money on a vacation this year, as Harry had told them that Isla de Marauder was theirs to use anytime they wanted.

“Put it toward buying Reiko a car for graduation, she can chauffeur me around at whatever university we go to.” He was kidding of course, but they still tried one last time to argue.

“We were already going to do that for her graduation present.” That was a pleasant surprise.

“Well, then get her a nicer one than you were planning. I got deal because I bought more than one, so it was only \$7,500 for yours anyway.”

“Alright then, if you insist. Don’t tell her about the car though, she’s already asked for it graduation, but it would be nice if we could surprise her.”

“Mums the word, I promise. Just do one thing for me.”

“Sure, what?” They were intrigued, and Harry talked in a bit of a lower voice.

“If you go to the island unannounced, when you pop your head out of the trunk, yell out to make sure that no one is there. If someone yells back, exit the trunk very slowly and try not to look at the doors leading to the bedrooms until you get an all clear. The twins and Angelina and Alicia will probably be there a lot, and they’re not as discreet as we might like them to be.” Karl was the one who blushed, ironically enough, as Lisa started chuckling.

“We are duly warned Harry, and thank you, for the trunk and the use of the island.” Karl said the same, and Harry just waved it off.

“It’s my pleasure, you two take good care of Hedwig when she’s there, that’s reason enough for me.” Harry had forgotten to ask Anthony Hook if owls could go through the trunk floo, he still hadn’t needed Hedwig for an actual letter in over a year. She was still the number one on his staff though, and would always have a home with him, wherever he went in the future.

Saturday, August 10, 1997

10:00 am

Great Lakes Dining Hall

This was to be the last day of the Flackter Alley trips, and the gang, along with four other students, had drawn this final slot. Murray gave them the usual speech about not getting into trouble, it was duly noted, and then they were off. They got to the portkey area in good order, and found that Grace Coyle and Lina Peterson were already waiting there with Marty and Keisha, who were impatient to get away from their mothers and on with things. The four of them had gotten there half an hour earlier and had gotten their banking done already. They kissed their kids goodbye, and gave warning looks to Warrick and Harry that were similar to the one Karen had. Harry turned to his roommate after the two mothers left.

“Just why am I getting these looks and not Reiko? If anyone should be blamed for stuff going wrong it’s the two of you. As your girlfriend, she does outrank me on the retribution scale you know.” Warrick had absolutely no sympathy.

“You feel free to take that up with my Aunts anytime you like Harry.” Harry would forego that pleasure.

“Eh, no thanks. Let’s get going. I just know you two want to see the bank again.” They didn’t mind really, and without grousing they fell in step. They had read all about Harry of course, after having met him at Thanksgiving. They liked him, not just because he was famous and their cousin’s roommate, but because there always seemed to be action around Harry, and they wanted to get in on that.

Marty Coyle was 5’6 already, and getting taller by the minute. His afro was more hair than Harry, Warrick, and the absent Jonas had combined, but he did that more to be different than anything. His cousin Keisha Peterson was also a tall one, at 5’3, she would be catching Sophie soon, and probably Claudia not long after that. Keisha’s father was of the Swedish persuasion, so her skin was much lighter than Warrick’s or Marty’s. Both of their fathers worked for their father-in-law in the Nike Magical/Muggle department based in Bloomington, and they looked at Warrick more as a big brother/playmate than anything.

The group got their money first, and Warrick resisted his cousins' pleas to get their wands next.

"Nope, that's last, it'll be the highlight of the day for you. Besides, you'll appreciate it more with just a bit more anticipation." They both looked at him like he was crazy, but held their tongues.....mostly, they could be seen muttering to each other. In truth, Warrick wanted to make sure that any mayhem they did was non-magical. They were going into muggle Milwaukee in a little while, and there was no way he was doing that when they had wands.

The Apothecary was first, and Warrick and Reiko loaded up, for Jonas as well, something they had done the last year too. The smells of that place always made Harry think of Snape, so he, Sophie, and Claudia hung outside. Sophie looked in the shop nervously.

"Well they haven't destroyed anything yet." Claudia had an opinion on that.

"I think this is all being overblown. I doubt those two want to face their mothers if we have any stories to tell." Sophie immediately perked up, but Harry didn't look too sure.

"I don't think that would stop them. They've got Fred and George written all over them, and I remember all too well that they didn't care about any motherly repercussions."

"Well at least Warrick didn't let them have their wands."

"I'm glad he stuck to the plan." The plan that Harry and Warrick had hashed out the night before.

The four of them came out, bags in hand, they were going to be using Harry's and Sophie's old cauldrons. Reiko shrunk the bags and put them in her purse. Both the Novices-to-be almost began drooling when they saw that, one could almost see their minds working:

“Next month we get to learn how to do that.” They didn’t say that out loud, but everyone could tell that they were thinking it. It was one thing to see parents do that, but Reiko was a 17 year old Witch that they were already bigger than. That brought it home.

Next stop was to get an owl, as their mothers decided that they didn’t really need one each, since they lived in the same place and had the same muggle friends.....the pair of them lived two streets over from each other in Bloomington. In a pinch they could use Hedwig too, Harry really did need to think of some work to have her do. He didn’t want her back at Hogwarts, she would see that as a demotion.

They settled on a grey owl that they immediately named Skinner, after the FBI supervisor in The X-Files, it seemed that they had hashed this out ahead of time. The owl wasn’t balding like the character, but he appeared to be pleased with his new name.

He was not pleased, however, that he would have to wait in the shop for them to come back. They tag-teamed him though, with assurances that it wouldn’t be long, and that they really couldn’t take him into muggle Milwaukee now could they? He gave them a look that seemed to say ‘if you say so’, and everything was fine.

Dress robes were next, as they and Warrick all needed some. Warrick was now 6’4, which was the height he would end up at as it turned out, so he needed new robes. Harry got to play the peanut gallery this time, and gave his roommate a rather long roasting, reminiscent of the one in October when he got his own. The two youngsters were still behaving, and it was almost worse this way, as they all had to wait for the time bomb to go off later rather than sooner. They did the requisite fidgeting around of course, but allowed the salesperson to walk them through the process. Their mothers had told them to get whatever colors suited them best, if it was ugly then it was their own fault.

Or more than likely it would be Warrick’s and Harry’s fault, and both men knew it. The kids continued to confound them though, and Keisha’s dress robes were a nice maroon, and Marty’s were navy blue. Harry still had a maroon Weasley sweater from long ago in his

trunk, taking up space since it never fit him, so he would give it to Keisha later on.

All this had taken a couple of hours, and so it was on to lunchtime. They didn't split up, even though Harry and Sophie had been wanting to go to Mario's. They ate at a local fast food joint though, and then it was on to the mall. Both of them needed school uniforms, and that alone took two, very long, hours. Still, everyone got through it okay, with all the 'adults' needing some new clothes as well. As Warrick was up at the cashier paying for his own clothes, Harry took the two youngsters aside and slipped them enough money to pay for half of their purchases.

"Use what you have leftover as spending money, but if your parents ask, this never happened." It was his way of rewarding them for being good so far, and both kids just smiled and slapped his hands in thanks.

"What never happened Harry?"

"I knew you would understand Marty."

"Yeah, thanks Harry, you're a lot cooler than Warrick." Thank goodness Warrick didn't hear that, though he was trying to be the responsible one today, and stay out of trouble with his mother and aunts.

"That's because I never changed your diapers Keisha." Sophie heard this, and her giggles attracted some attention, but nothing came of it fortunately.

They did some movie shopping for awhile, and then it was back to Flackter Alley for books and wands. The books for the Seniors were easy: They had one for each subject, period, aside from Harry, Jonas, and Claudia for Muggle Studies, having two. Senior Year was almost all practical, and the Defense books in particular would rarely be opened. Keisha and Marty, though, had at least two for each class, even Astronomy. As they were paying, they looked at their piles with a mounting sense of horror.

“Do we really have to study all that?!”

“How are we going to have time for anything else!?”

All five Seniors just looked at them and smiled, they had all said similar things years ago, if only to themselves.

“It’s a rite of passage, my young cousins. Besides, our classes meet a lot less than in muggle elementary school, so you’ll have more time for studying.” Keisha and Marty didn’t look too reassured at that, but each of the privately figured if Warrick could get through, so could they. Marty had one last, interesting, comment.

“Well it’s a good thing we have so many experts in all the subjects ready to help us.” And the shoe dropped, but Reiko took them firmly in hand and led them out of the bookstore.

“I’m sure we’ll work out an arrangement of some sort.” This young protégé thing would be harder than they thought.....except for Reiko, who had long ago decided that Dobby needed a break from all his Great Lakes deliveries. The young ones would be happy to do it in exchange for some extra homework help, or so she figured. They had 40 minutes to spare, and after picking up Skinner, they had one last stop to make.

The last stop in question was Coghlan’s Wand Shoppe, and it was strongly hinted to the two kids on the way there that it would be very politic if the wands that wound up choosing them, to quote old man Ollivander, would be ones made by their Uncle Martin. Martin Forrester made a great living selling his wands of course, and the majority of them were sold here at Coghlan’s.

Both of them were a bit worried that no wands would wind up choosing them, but each was fitted out after about five minutes apiece. It helped that Harry and Sophie took Mr. Coghlan Jr. aside and made him aware that the niece and nephew of one of his suppliers were in the house. So all they got to pick from were Martin Forrester Originals, and it was in that selection that they found the

right fit, to the everlasting relief of all involved. They got back to the portkey area with 10 minutes to spare, and just shot the breeze for the remainder of the time, before Lina and Grace came back. They looked around briefly as if to satisfy themselves that Flackter Alley was still standing, and then smiled at their nephew and his roommate.

“Did you kids get everything?”

“Yeah Mom.”

“We did Aunt Lina.”

“They were our little angels Aunt Grace, Aunt Lina, everything was smooth as silk. Right guys?” The other four nodded in relief.

“Glad to hear it, you kids can keep any leftover change you might have.” Keisha and Marty both kept straight faces at hearing that, a practiced look for them. Lina and Grace had owled ahead to find out all the prices, but didn’t count on Harry kicking in for half their clothes, and the fact that he and Dobby kept everyone supplied with stationary and things like that. That left a decent sum leftover, one that they had big plans for back in Bloomington and for the first few months of term. Their allowance from Uncle Antonio didn’t start until Christmas, once they had assured him that they weren’t going to get thrown out of school right from jump.....this was not just for them, Warrick had had to do the same ‘show readiness’ test as well years earlier to get his money.

“Thanks to you five for looking after them for us, we wanted you to get used to the job.” This was said with a smile by Grace, but Harry knew that the Map 2.5 would be getting a workout in the coming months.

Saturday, August 17, 1997

The Leaky Cauldron

Noon GMT

This was the monthly meeting of The Dark Force Defense League, and Harry's first official trip back to Britain in over two weeks. The meetings were not on any specific weekend of the month usually, the July meeting had been on the first Saturday, but the dates were made in consultation with Dumbledore and Rufus, and how the vagaries of their schedules meshed. Harry had been given a round-trip portkey before had left Britain, and it was still in his pocket, unused. He had taken the trunk floo to the shop, leaving three hours early so as to not arouse suspicion with Murray. That meant a wake-up of 2:30 am, and he was still yawning, even though he had gotten a kip at WWW.

Bill, Arthur, Remus and Tonks met the WWW three and they all walked over together, idly chatting about Harry's activities back in the States, as few as they were. Arthur was meeting them there, and Bill spent some of the walk talking about his Italian honeymoon, which was suitably romantic and all that. They got to The Leaky Cauldron with a few minutes to spare, just before the twins could start in on the 'is she preggers yet' questions, and found that the room was filling up. Dumbledore and his people were already there, and Harry girded himself to approach the old man. Both men, despite the hostility of their last meeting, were the soul of politeness toward each other.

"Albus."

"Hello Harry, how is life back in Michigan?"

"It's fine thank you, very quiet."

"I'm glad to hear it, what can I do for you?" Harry took a deep breath.

"In the interest of acknowledging our new found détente with each other, I recognize that our meeting last month was cut short. Now it was cut short for a very good reason mind you, and things would only have deteriorated if it had progressed any further.....but if you have any unasked questions for me, that you meant to ask then or would like to ask now, just write them on a piece of parchment during our interminable meeting today and give them to me afterward. I'll answer them and have Dobby get them back to you in a day or two." Of all

the things Dumbledore had been thinking Harry would say to him, this was far, far down the list.

“And what do you want from me in return? The same?” Pleased that he had surprised the old man, Harry shook his head nonetheless.

“Not right now, maybe in a few months. We have once a month for the next year to get that done, and I’m in no hurry any longer. If you would prefer to pay attention to the meeting this afternoon, just send the questions to the shop, and the twins or Lee will get them to me.” Dumbledore’s smile was very genuine.

“Very well Harry, I appreciate the gesture. A united front is needed, and I’m very pleased to see that you think so as well.”

“You’re welcome Albus.” Harry moved back to the spot that Bill and Arthur had saved for him, declining to acknowledge McGonagall at all.

“How hard was that?”

“Not hard at all Bill. For all his myriad of faults, he’s on the right side. Besides, his questions can’t be that difficult.” He had told them on the way over what he was going to do.

“Or so you hope.”

“I’m allowed to hope aren’t I?”

Dumbledore soon got the meeting underway, and the main topic was the battle royal that had taken place at Riddle Manor between the Aurors, werewolves, and Death Eaters. Sanford Jenkins, the Auror on site for the entire melee, gave a long report on what he had witnessed, as well as some of the mop up details. Travis also spoke, and both men got some hard questions from the retired group of Aurors, one of the larger constituencies in the room, about why they had waited so long to join the fray. They were among the larger groups because the current Aurors were still below ideal levels because of the Malfoy trial losses, and many of the new Wizengamot members that Rufus had appointed were already League members.

It should be explained that The Dark Force Defense League was not a decision-making body of any kind, there were no votes or parliamentary procedure type maneuvers going on. The League members, aside from Harry, the twins, and all the Aurors, were nominally under Dumbledore's and The Minister's joint authority.....the exceptions were all under Rufus' command by itself. It was still an all volunteer organization though, and the members by and large would not be moved around like chess pieces.

So Travis and Sanford answered the questions with their collective teeth firmly gritted, but they got through it. Castor Archer had made contact with them, but was still in hiding for the time being, he was not willing to come in at this point, even with a written immunity agreement. His status, and existence, was not mentioned here. Rufus and Bones updated them on Lucius, still recovering slowly in a locked ward at St. Mungo's.....or that's what they told the members, Malfoy in reality was hidden away deep within The Ministry. With Dumbledore now more or less put to heel, Rufus was setting his sights on Augustus McCrae, owner and publisher of The Daily Prophet. Rufus was on a mole-hunt, and since The Ministry was now rodent free, this was his next area of concern. He needed some amusement anyway.

Fred spoke for the WWW three, talking about how Lee had found the head and what Remus had told them about Greyback and Edward Grant, with Remus doing the appropriate nodding in agreement, when necessary. Grant was still an unknown among the higher-ups in magical Britain, his name had been bandied about for years, but few were certain of who he was and what he was capable of. Oh, he had always been Greyback's subordinate, but he could go places that his boss simply couldn't.....and never could any longer. Travis summed it all up:

“In short, we believe that the werewolf threat is now dormant at the least, eliminated at the most. It was a bold plan to assault Riddle Manor, and while it succeeded in part, it cost them the vast majority of their remaining forces. If our intelligence is correct, as we believe it is, then we can focus on the Death Eaters and where they might be located. We have leads, and are following up on them. This is a

difficult time for Auror Command, as we are breaking in the new class of graduates from the Academy, and the reformed crews are working in their new members.” One result of that was that Tonks was now the number two in her crew, with Kate Sackoff taking over from the re-positioned James Bamber, who was breaking in two newbies on a different crew.

Our old friend Lance LeGault had a semi-polite question for Travis:

“Where do you anticipate the next Death Eater attack will be? How vulnerable is Diagon Alley?”

“Diagon Alley, for the time being, is not vulnerable to attack, as Voldemort is not likely to want to antagonize the merchants there. It is our feeling that he will concentrate more on the squibs, and with recruiting enough soldiers to replace his Riddle Manor losses.”

“You hope. What if you’re wrong?”

“No one is ever 100 percent right Lance, aside from Minister Scrimgeour.” LeGault did not take this as humorously as most others did.

“Answer the question.”

“If I am wrong, then the merchants and denizens of Diagon Alley will have to fight, and I have every confidence that they will do so, and do it well.” He didn’t really, other than the twins and a few others who knew what they were doing. The Defense fiascos of Dumbledore and his predecessor Dippet had sown a thick layer of rot into the fighting abilities of the British magical communities. The Death Eaters weren’t much better, but they could rely on Dark Magic and a certain lack of a moral compass to get them by in battle.

After the meeting was over, Dumbledore shook his head at Harry in the negative, indicating that he had not prepared his question list yet. Harry had looked at him periodically and had not seen him do any scribbling, so this was not unexpected. However, he did motion for Harry to remain behind, and the lad surprised the Weasley men by

doing so. Remus and Tonks were already out the door when this happened, they had a dinner engagement with her parents, so they missed the slight bit of fun. Once everyone else had left the room, it was just Dumbledore, McGonagall, and the Weasleys joining Harry. Dumbledore pulled out a chair and sat down, though he was the only one who did.

“Harry, there is one idea I would like to float by you, one that I have been thinking about for some time. I would like for Hogwarts to have better relations with our American counterparts, and I was wondering about the feasibility of a Quidditch match between our two schools. Now I know that Headmistress Murray is not my most ardent admirer, but I know that she does love Quidditch. All the proceeds to charity of course, or we could just not charge admission, it would be a fun way of promoting cooperation across the water, without the attendant difficulties of a Tri-Wizard Tournament type of competition. What do you think?” Harry didn’t really know what to say at first, it seemed that Dumbledore had accepted his *détente* offer, examined it, and was now taking it three times around the dance floor. To delay a second, he asked:

“I’m guessing that you would want this game at Hogwarts?”

“Either way would be fine with me, though I understand our stadium is bigger.” Yes it was.

“Well there’s one problem I can think of right off the bat, and it’s probably a deal breaker.” McGonagall, with no Rufus to quiet her, grabbed on to that one, and with an acid tone:

“Of course there is Potter, it’s because Headmaster Dumbledore suggested it.” That wasn’t a totally unreasonable reply, but Harry decided to torment her a moment.

“I’m sorry, did you say something Minerva? I wasn’t paying attention.” Rufus had told him that that was how Shepherd usually responded to her. Dumbledore certainly noticed this, and turned to her.

“Minerva, if you would wait outside for me please, thank you.” She did just that, the perfect automaton. The old man turned back to Harry, only to find the lad’s finger pointing at him.

“Put a leash on her Dumbledore, I only promised not to try to duel you, she was not part of that detail of the bargain. Nothing would give me more pleasure right now than to tear a piece of hide off of her. I was not referring to you when I said that there was a deal breaker, and it would have been nice to have been able to finish my point without her being so bloody judgmental.” Dumbledore wanted no part of Harry going after McGonagall magically, he knew that his Deputy would not stand much of a chance, so in his best soothing tone of voice:

“I will speak to her Harry, you will have no problem with her at the next meeting or thereafter. Now what was the Quidditch problem?”

“The problem is that the best flyers at my school, and I would imagine the other three, play Quodpot. In our Flying Challenge event in the Olympics, only the twins here and I and one other placed in the top ten among the Quidditch players, and you can surely agree that the three of us are special cases. Only Sally Jenkins and my friend Reiko placed in the top 20 if you take us out of it. I’ve seen the pensieve memories of all three of Ron’s games from this past season, only Sally and I would have scored on him from our league, and she wouldn’t have run wild on him like she did the other Keepers.”

“She didn’t on yours, or so I’m told.” The twins rarely smiled around Dumbledore these days, but now was one of those times.

“We paid some attention to her.”

“Our special project.” Harry was smiling, it was a lovely memory, even Arthur was chuckling now, as things did not appear as though they would get out of hand.

“My point exactly. She was Player of the Year before we got there, and three blokes who had never played Chaser in a real game shut her down completely. I shudder to think what Angelina, Alicia, and

Katie would have done. I don't know about the other schools, but an all-star team from Great Lakes would get wiped out unless I got the Snitch in the first 10 minutes of the game." Which he had done before of course.

"So while I appreciate the spirit behind the offer, it just wouldn't work, if only for that reason." And that Murray would blow multiple blood vessels if he even brought it up to her. He didn't mention that, though the twins were sure prepared to. Dumbledore actually looked a bit embarrassed though, and didn't argue with them.

"I had not thought of that Harry, you raise an excellent point, a deal breaker as you say." Harry then attempted to head him off at the pass on a related subject.

"You are welcome to talk this over with Professor Murray of course, but if you're looking to suggest an Olympic contest to her, I would stage one of your own first, just so the Hogwarts students would have some familiarity with the events in question."

"You seemed to do just fine in your first try, as did Fred and George here." Be nice Harry, be nice, Harry kept telling himself as he responded to the dumb-ish question.

"Well I am more magically gifted than your average Hogwarts type person Albus, plus I had all of my friends and Housemates giving me pointers and pensieve memories of what they had been through in years past, as did Fred and George here, who's gifts weren't brought out until the end it seems. Hermione, Lisa Turpin and company wouldn't have that. If Professor Murray would even agree to it in the first place." He felt that he had no choice but to add that last part. Dumbledore was willing to concede that point, but did press on.

"Would it be possible for you to get me a list of the events in your Olympics? I still think it would be a good idea, even if we cannot get an inter-school event going in time for you to participate." Harry was half tempted to tell him to borrow Remus' back issues of The Chronicle, he had told Harry that he saved the ones that dealt with anything to do with Great Lakes, and the Olympics had been covered

very extensively. But 'be nice' was the mantra here, and it would cost him nothing to be polite.

"That would be no problem at all, I'll get on it when I return to school, as I don't know them all off the top of my head."

"Thank you Harry. I will see you next month, and I will have that list of questions to you early next week." Harry couldn't wait.

"That will be fine Albus, have a good day." Harry quickly wheeled around and got out of there before another handshake offer could be made. There was always the possibility of a hidden portkey, and he hadn't made it to 17.05 years by taking things for granted, as unlikely as a snatch attempt would be. He yawned as he passed by McGonagall, another Charles Shepherd strategy, but didn't stop to see the reaction it garnered. Arthur and his sons saw it though, but she wasn't fool enough to try to throw down on Harry with them in the room. Arthur and Bill both went back to the office, each had some paperwork to finish up before dinner.

Harry, Fred, and George all walked back to the shop, Harry saw that it was still before lunchtime back in Michigan, so he had some time to chat before heading back.....except that he then realized that he had to delay the three hours for portkey rest. Oh well, he would be eating in the trunk, and he was fairly hungry now that he thought on it. One would think that sitting around listening to speeches wouldn't do that, he was debating out loud on what to have Winky make for him, and the twins were very helpful with cereal suggestions. The three got to the shop in good order, only to find that Lee was at the front door waiting for them. He had a worried look on his face, and since Lee was one of the most laid back blokes any of them had ever met, this was something odd.

"What's going on Lee?" He took a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

"This was left earlier by a customer. I don't know when it happened or from who, it was pretty busy in here for a time. Read it." Harry took the paper and opened it.

To the WWW partners and their Floor Manager,

If you would like to know who left a certain body part on your doorstep a few weeks back, tie a piece of red cloth to your front doorknob and wait for instructions. I know where you are right now and I will wait one hour past the time your Dark Force Defense League meeting finishes.

Signed,

An interested potential ally

End Chapter

Author's Note: Since we're back to America for the next few chapters, all times will be Eastern Time unless I put the GMT on the end of it. The Sorting for the Great Lakes Novices, and opening feast for all of them, is in this chapter. I'm going to skip certain parts of it, since it was described pretty well in Chapter Five. I know, that seems like a long time ago, but I don't want to repeat myself, or make you re-read anything. So don't expect a teacher list or anything like that, assume that none of them change. Anything in detail will either be new stuff or old stuff combined with new stuff. If that makes any sense whatsoever.

Saturday, August 16, 1997 Continued

WWW

4:45 pm GMT

The four of them stared at each other for a minute, pondering the note as they waited for someone to say something. Finally Fred turned to Harry.

"You know Junior, I think this is going to be cosmic payback for you being so nice to Dumbledore today. If it blows up in our faces, then it will be a sign that you should go back to being nasty to him. If it works, then you did the right thing." Lee and George were now smiling, and Harry couldn't help but join them.

"I would say that you're full of shit Fred, except that I was thinking the same thing. Are we all agreed that some cloth needs to be put on that door?" They all nodded, and Lee went back to the storeroom and found something that fit the bill. Before he put it on the doorknob though:

"Is this something we should be keeping to ourselves? Or should we alert our Ministry friends?" George immediately shook his head.

"No, that would scare them off. The note didn't say 'Don't contact The Ministry', but it might as well have. We have to see how this plays out, I mean if it's just one or two people, we can take them if it

comes to a battle.” No one disagreed with him, so Lee opened the door and fastened the cloth. While he did this, Fred queried Harry about something that had been festering slightly in his mind.

“Oh by the way Junior, why did you give away the Shepherd tells to McGonagall like you did?” For once, Harry looked guilty about that.

“I really wasn’t thinking about that, I just wanted to get her goat a little. She can’t really do anything to Remus for telling them to me, but I’ll warn him anyway.”

“We need to sneak back in there sometime and see what the place is like without us.” George, Lee, and Harry all looked sick at the thought, and mercifully Fred dropped it. It would come up again a few weeks from now, little did they know.

They waited about 15 minutes, during which the twins and Lee gave Harry his weekly update on the business and how it was going. The Hogwarts kids were still doing their school shopping, so the place had been pretty busy for a couple of weeks now. There were always muggleborns who didn’t get to London until the last minute, so they expected things to keep going. The shop generally cleared around 15,000 galleons a month in sales, both in store and through the catalogs and their sales to the British and American governments, with a profit margin of around 30 percent on the average. That was after materials, taxes, salaries for Lee and the other manufacturers, and stipends for Fred and George were taken out. So the twins made more than a Hogwarts Professor like Remus, but less than a Brit Quidditch star like Angelina. They lived rent free, so the money they made was even better, and they owned the building and lot free and clear too.

After that 15 minute wait, the bell on the door rang, and two men entered. Harry and company already had their wands out, and raised them slightly at the visitors. The taller one smiled slightly, and in a friendly tone of voice:

“Is that how you greet all visitors to your shop?” Harry replied:

“Says the man who put a head on a pike to help us decorate it.” The men both laughed, though it wasn’t especially funny.

“Fair enough. My name is Edward Grant, this is my associate Alan Brandon.” Still wary, Harry replied:

“Do we need to tell you who we are?” Another faint smile from Grant.

“Well which one of you is Fred and which one is George?” George answered him:

“We don’t even tell our mother that, you deserve no better. What do you want with us?”

“To talk for a start. We have no interest in a fight of any kind with you, and we will put our wands on the counter over there if you will do the same. I can fight wandlessly just as you can Harry, so there will be no advantage for either of us.” That was reasonable, but Harry had something to do first. He made a copy of Grant’s note, and called for Dobby.

“Dobby!” The elf popped in.

“Yes Harry?” Harry handed him the note, folded in two.

“Please give this to Professor Murray and ask that I be allowed to extend my stay here for an hour. If she says yes, and I assume that she will, please go tell Sophie.”

“On my way Harry.” Dobby popped off, never asking who the strangers were. Harry looked at Grant and Brandon, all the while doing a very obvious scan of them for Tracking Charms and other unwanted additions to the shop.

“The key to getting, and keeping, freedom, is being where you are supposed to be, when you’re supposed to be. You do that, then they’ll do anything to accommodate you.” This was borne out a couple of minutes later as Dobby came back.

“Professor Murray said that would be fine with her. I also told Sophie as you instructed.” Dobby neglected to talk about Sophie’s reaction, which was just as well in this company.

“Thank you Dobby.” Dobby left, and Fred motioned toward the back of the shop.

“If you’ll head that way, we can do our business in relative private.” Lee moved past Grant and Brandon and locked the front door, flipping the muggle style CLOSED sign to face the Alley. The two werewolves did as bidden, and put their wands on the counter first, as a sign of good faith. Harry and company followed suit, reluctant though they might be. Fred, George, and Lee weren’t much good with wandless magic, but Harry was confident that he could delay the werewolves long enough for the others to get their wands back, if a battle were to come out of this, though he missed the series of nods between Fred and George. Once they were all back in the living room, Lee’s place now, Harry began:

“So, what shall we talk about first? Why you killed Fenrir Greyback? Or why you staked his head outside of our shop?” Grant was the spokesman for his duo.

“Are we all in agreement that he in fact needed to die?” Harry was the main talker for the WWW’s.

“Well that depends doesn’t it? Are you going to be worse?”

“If by worse, do you mean will I be more incompetent as a leader than Fenrir? No, sad to say, I will not be a worse leader of soldiers.” Yeah, about that.....

“It’s our understanding that you don’t have many left to lead.”

“True, the Riddle Manor debacle cost us dearly. But some might say that fewer is better.” Not Harry, but he let the man have his illusions.

“Let’s return to Greyback being an incompetent leader for a minute if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly. You see Harry, just because one is powerful, that doesn’t make them a great leader. Our mutual friend Voldemort for example: He has all the magical power one could ever want, but what does he do with it? He kills squibs and pursues vendettas against teenagers. Greyback was the same way, he had no real focus, at least on goals that were obtainable.”

“Such as?”

“He wanted equality with Voldemort, and a place at the table if and when the Death Eaters took over magical Britain.” Lee actually started laughing, and Harry was chuckling himself.

“I doubt that went over well at Riddle Manor.”

“It didn’t go over at all, since Voldemort refused to meet with him. Except once.”

“The night Draco was kidnapped, I believe that was your handiwork.” Both werewolves smiled.

“Yes, that was a wonderful night, a lot was accomplished. For your side as well.”

“How so?”

“It essentially removed Draco and Narcissa Malfoy from the other side and put him on yours, though not willingly I gather.”

“After you people bit the bejeezus out of him. Why did you Obliviate him afterward?” This was strange territory for Harry to be wandering in.....defending Draco Malfoy, even a little bit. He knew that he would need a shower when he got home.

“A total of 23 of us bit him, only once apiece.....only the first one really mattered of course, since a bite from a werewolf as powerful as Fenrir is guaranteed to turn someone. Why did we Oblivate him? To amuse ourselves, to make him wonder. He'll always wonder Harry, and now only two of his torturers are left alive to tell him, if we so choose.”

“You enjoyed it?”

“We would not have done it otherwise my young friend, plus we needed the ransom money.”

Fred took over for a second.

“All right, let's skip the getting to know you crap for a second. What do you want from us? What are we doing here?”

“We want an alliance with you, not with Dumbledore and his minions, nor with Rufus Scrimgeour. With you.”

“Why us? We're four men with no official positions.”

“Oh please, you twins and your partner here are the most influential and well connected Wizards even close to your age in this country, and it's not really that close. You have reputations as great fighters, and great innovators as well, due to your joke business. You're the future and the present at the same time.” George just shook his head.

“Your flattery is all well and good, and we do enjoy hearing about how awesome we are.....but the point remains, why do you want to ally yourselves with us and not The Ministry? I mean we know that most anti-werewolf laws are still on the books, but you could cut a deal with them no problem. If Rufus Scrimgeour is anything, it's a dealmaker.” No one knew that better than the four teenagers in this room right now.

“We know that something like that is coming, but we wanted to test the waters, as they say.” Harry took back the questioning reins:

“Okay, let’s say that we’re willing and able to do this. What do we get from you? You and your wands only? Or something more?”

“I take it that our wand talents are not enough?”

“I’m sure Draco and Narcissa Malfoy would have something to say about it if you joined us, as well as most of our fellow League members. I’m sure half of that body would nominate us for an Order of Merlin First Class if we were to kill you right now.” Harry took care to make sure that he didn’t sound overly threatening when he said that last part, and Grant smiled in response.

“So they would, but you never seriously thought about that.” He was right actually, Harry had not ‘seriously’ thought about it.

“It’s interesting that you would bet your lives on that.”

“Yes it is, and I would hope that you would see this as proof of our honest intentions.” Harry couldn’t deny that much.

“It’s a start. Now you were saying something about what you could offer our side beyond being lower principled versions of Remus Lupin?”

“All right then, if a sample is what you want.....how would you like to know the location of their new Potions Master’s old laboratory, the one he had before signing on to join the Death Eaters?” While that would personally do him not a shred of good, Harry was intrigued.

“As long as the sample also contains who the new Potions Master is, yes.” Grant knew all this from his questioning/torture of the late Lawrence Granger, no relation.

“His name is Michael Parrish, a Durmstrang man, he is Welsh-Norwegian, and his old laboratory, which is still functioning on some level, is in Norway. They had him in place after Hogsmeade but before Snape’s untimely death.” Harry still felt a pang after hearing that.

“How do you know this?”

“Sorry, the sample is finished, but it shows that we have extensive knowledge about your enemy’s operation, many of which details he would not be able to change, or even know that he should. I want to know if we have the possibility of a deal.” Harry couldn’t let one point go:

“And I remind you yet again that the four of us are in no position to do a deal like that. Are you wanting money? Immunity? I’m 6,000 kilometers away from here for the next 10 plus months, and I don’t need a pair of bodyguards at school, especially since the wards would incinerate you.” They had been rather beefed up.

“We will work with The Ministry, through you. You will be our contacts.”

“One question just begs to be asked.....why are you doing this? Because you believe in our side of the fight? Or because you’re pissed at my friend Voldemort for wiping out most of your pack? There is no wrong answer here, so a truthful one would be appreciated.” He knew he should have offered them a spiked drink, but he assumed that they would be wary of something so obvious. Surely Rufus would insist on that and more when his turn came to be the dancer here.

“A little of the first option, a lot more of the second. Look Harry, we know all about Remus Lupin and how he has been assimilated into your culture, with the help of the Wolfsbane Potion. Let’s just say that he is a useful example of what happens when our two sides get along well.”

Harry pondered that for a few seconds.

“Okay, the four of us need to talk, so I’m going to get my wand and put up a Silencing Bubble so that we can do it here in front of you. That way we’re assured that you won’t do something rash, and you’ll be assured that we’re not going to floo the Aurors and get them over

here without your acquiescence. Agreed?" Grant appreciated the practicality of the solution.

"Agreed."

Harry walked to the front of the shop to retrieve his wand, he could do the Bubble without it, but didn't want to let the visitors know this. He was back in a few seconds, too few for a floo call, and put up the Bubble, after showing the werewolves that he didn't bring any other wands in with him. He put his hand over his mouth, just in case one of the werewolves could read lips. The others aped him, assuming he had seen it in some movie. Fred led off:

"Well Harry? What the hell do we do now? If we turn them down we're going to have a fight in here." Harry was still thinking, so he temporized.

"What do you think George?" His partner sure had an opinion.

"I say we do the deal, but only if Rufus and Travis are fully onboard with it. I'm not comfortable with having our own intelligence squad out there, whatever else they are capable of. That just draws us too far into this thing, when there are professionals who get paid to do it. What do you think Lee?"

"I say we don't do this at all. Stun them right now and have them arrested. I never liked Malfoy, but what they did to him was beyond the pale, getting him hooked on narcotics and then biting him like that, who knows what else they did to him. Harry? You're being awfully quiet."

"I don't want to do this, but I think we have to. I'm sorry Lee, but we don't owe Draco anything, you dance with a cobra and eventually he's going to bite you, so he shouldn't have been surprised when nasty things happened." Lee still didn't like it, but he knew that as the battle-untested one here, his vote counted least. He had one last riposte though.

"What would Remus say to this?" Harry considered that.

“He would say that we have to leave no stone unturned, no straw ungrasped, even a final straw. He would go along with this.” Harry was tempted to cross his fingers as he said that, but didn’t want to give Lee the satisfaction of knowing he was guessing.

“Now the question is, whether our Ministry friends will do it. I’m in it if they’re sign off on it.”

“I with brother George, but I wonder at Rufus’ reaction.”

“Yeah Fred, that is the sticky wicket. Let’s find out.” Harry dissolved the Bubble, he had noticed that Grant and Brandon had stayed silent, in fact Brandon had not spoken at all beyond the initial pleasantries. Harry took a deep breath.

“Okay then, we’re willing to go along with your plan, as long as Rufus Scrimgeour and Travis Biller do as well, and we will do our best to sell it to them. What we will not do is go behind their backs and run you on our own. We are not, nor will we ever be, like Dumbledore and The Order of the Phoenix, running a private war. I’ve been through enough Muggle Studies to know that those never turn out well. That said, since you came here in good faith, we will not give you up to The Ministry if they turn this down as long as you promise no reprisals against us or the shop if they do turn this down. Acceptable?” Grant turned this over in his mind for a moment, while Brandon had a slight smile on his face, and actually said something.

“I was not aware that they taught law at your American school?” Brandon was 33, and vaguely remember the original Marauders and friends from his time at Hogwarts.

“They don’t, though videotapes of Law and Order are smuggled in pretty frequently. I’ve made a lot of these types of agreements lately, and I’m getting more and more used to them. Mr. Grant?”

“Make your floo call, but only if we have our wands back and an unlocked door from which to escape.”

“Agreed. Lee, will you go get the wands please?” Lee did so and soon everyone was armed again. All six of them went into the main area of the shop where the floo was, and Harry threw some powder in:

“Minister Scrimgeour!” That was the office, where Rufus usually spent Saturday afternoons catching up on paperwork and having private meetings that didn’t need too much attention. Rufus’s head popped in after a few seconds, during which Harry made sure that Grant and Brandon were not in the floo’s sightline.

“Hello there Harry, are you not supposed to be on your way back across right now?”

“If wishing made it so Minister, we’ve had a bit of a situation here.” He went on to describe what had transpired, though he did imply that the werewolves had left the shop, just in case.

Rufus took this all a lot better than Harry and company had feared he would, and seemed willing to talk about it.

“Get this man into your shop in the next 15 minutes, I’ll corral Travis and Amelia and we’ll join you there. I won’t guarantee him immediate immunity, but if his deal is as promising as he claims, he’ll have nothing to worry about. I know he’s probably standing right next to you, so it should be easy for him to agree or not.” Grant just smiled, and then stepped into view.

“I was not holding our friends hostage Minister Scrimgeour, I just wanted to make sure that I had a decent chance to evade your Aurors.”

“Edward Grant I presume? My Aurors already know that you’re there.” That brought everyone up short, as all eyes flickered to the door. Nobody seemed about ready to burst through it just yet, so Grant had a smile on his face.

“A nice bluff.”

“You think we don’t keep an watch on that shop? If the Death Eaters ever kick off a battle in Diagon Alley, WWW will be their first target. I’m sure my men don’t know that it’s you specifically, but I was alerted to it a few minutes after Lee closed the shop early.” That was either a lucky guess about Lee, or they really were watching.

“A couple of run of the mill Aurors wouldn’t be able to stop us if we really wanted to leave.” No they couldn’t.

“Harry could take you down inside of five seconds and we both know it, and whenever he’s in Britain he’s under my authority as part of The Dark Force Defense League. I’m not going that far yet though, since I’m interested in what you have to say. Give me the 15 minutes and I’ll be there. Harry?”

“Yes Minister?”

“If they try to leave the shop, restrain them.” Harry didn’t hesitate.

“Yes sir.”

“Good man.”

Rufus’ face disappeared from the fireplace, and everyone took a deep breath. Grant looked at Harry.

“How did that feel? Being ordered around like that?” After waiting to see if Grant was serious, Harry started laughing so hard that he almost choked, and Fred actually whacked him on the back.

“Are you for real? Find me a 17 year old teenager anywhere in the world, muggle or magical, that doesn’t take orders in some form, from some authority figure. Just because I take fewer than most doesn’t mean that I’m unwilling to period.” His older friends all looked at Harry like they had never really seen him before, and the werewolves picked up on that. Not that it would do them much good under the circumstances.

“Fair enough I suppose, we’re getting what we want, probably. What to do in the meantime.” Harry had an idea on that score.

“Tell us about The Michael Collins School, which is where I’m assuming you went to school, based on your accent.” A good guess, as that was where the Belfast born Grant had attended school, there being no magical Northern Ireland with all its attendant difficulties.

Grant looked mildly surprised at the question, but he took the ball and ran with it. He spent the next quarter hour talking about his old school, student population 45 or thereabouts most years. He and Brandon had obviously compared notes over the years, and so Grant seemed to know a bit about Hogwarts as well. Harry had to admit, even if only to himself, that Grant was an engaging fellow.

“It’s all about class size you know Harry, my year we had eight students in each class. That’s a lot of one-on-one instruction. I’m not half the Wizard you are, in terms of power, but I know that I’ve been better trained in most every respect. Your mate Dumbledore is a bloody fool for not doubling the teacher size in that cavern of his.” Harry sure agreed with that, aside from Dumbledore being his mate of course. Maybe in Bizarro World.

“Were you one of the ones attacking Hogwarts that day?” Another lovely memory for Grant and Brandon, neither of whom had been at Hogwarts then.

“No, we were sacking Hogsmeade. Greyback was in charge of the Hogwarts diversion. Pity about the greenhouses.”

Harry was about to reply that he had never much liked them anyway, when there was a loud knock at the door. Lee went over to unlock it.....a much more complicated lock than one that Alohomora could undo, he hadn’t actually unlocked it for Brandon and Grant as per the deal. He did so, and soon Rufus, Travis, and Amelia Bones were in the now crowded living area. Fortunately Lee had cleaned up last night, Claudia having come over you know.

“Minister Scrimgeour, Madam Bones, Head Auror Biller. Meet Edward Grant and Alan Brandon.” No one shook hands, not that anyone offered.

“The betrayers of Fenrir Greyback, live and in color. I suppose on some level we should thank you.”

“You’re most welcome. What did you wind up doing with the head? I noticed that you took it with you Travis Biller. In a conjured up bag I believe?” Travis was not a little impressed, though it’s not like he had checked for spies at the time.

“It’s in a secure place, just in case anyone decides to resurrect him from the dead, for blackmailing purposes.”

“That’s very good thinking, I knew we made the right decision on where to put him.” Bones was still having trouble believing that this entire meeting was taking place, and was about to say something about that when Travis got there first.

“We’re glad we could confirm that for you. So if you wouldn’t mind making your pitch, my wife has a game in 90 minutes and I’ll be clearing gnomes out of our garden for the rest of the year if I miss it.” The opening game of the season for the Harpies, and Rebecca Biller’s first game back since her maternity leave began. Grant looked at The Minister, who nodded as if he was fully onboard with that.

Grant gave his spiel, and was only interrupted a couple of times, for questions like these:

“Besides the two of you, how many other magical werewolves are left?”

“Just Lupin and Malfoy that we know about, and Fenrir and I were close enough that I believe he would have told me about any others. The rest were all killed in battle over the last year.”

“Any deal we would make would be contingent on you keeping it that way, you understand this don’t you?” Similar agreements had

been reached with Remus and Draco, both of whom had not resisted in the slightest, Remus being made aware that his Hogwarts employment rested on it. What conscience Draco had demanded that he not make anybody go through what he had. Hell got a little bit of a cold front after he said that, but no lasting damage was done.

More questions were asked after Grant had finished his pitch, a pitch that none of the three Ministry officials seemed to have a problem with, at least on the surface.

“How did you get your information from Riddle Manor.” Grant and Brandon looked at each other for a second, and decided that honesty was the best policy.

“Voldemort had a spy inside our pack, one Lawrence Granger, no relation to your young friend Hermione, at least that I know of. We didn’t discover this until the end, when Fenrir finally authorized the use of Veritaserum. Granger was magical, and somehow he was turned.” He knew just how, but didn’t want to share that just yet, unless the deal forced him to take Veritaserum.

“Where is he now?”

“Granger? He’s in many places at the moment, decomposing.” Rufus actually smiled at hearing that.

“Can’t suppose I blame you for that. So Voldemort doesn’t know that you turned him?”

“No he does not, the only ones who knew about the traitor were Fenrir, Alan, and myself. The others only knew that we had hard intelligence about the location of Riddle Manor, not where we got the intelligence from. So none were captured.” Travis had a question about that:

“That was an interesting battle, at least from our perspective. What went wrong?”

“Our man Granger underestimated the fighting ability of the Death Eaters in residence. It would seem that Voldemort was wary of you people attacking him, since he undoubtedly knew about your listening posts out there.”

“I’m sure he did, but you’ll notice that he wasn’t brazen enough to attack us either.” Grant scoffed.

“Of course not, he doesn’t want anything close to a fair fight after the Malfoy trial attack. He lost a lot of troops there, and it set him back a few months. His recruits have not been up to par, at least not as much as the ones lost. I’m sure our attack and your subsequent one did him no favors in that area either.”

Rufus listened to all of this with a growing sense of what he wanted to do. He found it interesting that the werewolves would go through WWW like they had, though not surprising. However uneven the public opinion about Harry might be, the young man.....he couldn’t really call him a lad any longer.....well he had a cachet that was hard to top. He wondered if there would be more neutrals or Death Eaters that would turn like this. He made mental plans to speak to Travis about this later. He looked straight at Grant now:

“All right, let me see if I have this straight. You basically want me to give you letters of marque, allowing you to attack Death Eater targets whenever you choose, with your contacts being these four young men. In exchange you’re willing to share information, with me also giving you immunity for past crimes against Hogsmeade and Draco Malfoy. Am I correct?”

“Yes, that is what we want.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re offering value for the money quite yet. The Malfoys are no problem really, though you should have Obliviated your heroin dealing while you were at it, a bit sloppy if you ask me. All you have to do is change your name after the war and they won’t know the difference, I doubt he remembers what you look like. Did you ever meet Narcissa?”

“No, I have never been to Malfoy Manor, only a moron would have gone to any of their homes, where I would have been in their power. And I am not a moron.” So it would seem.

“Good, now as for immunity for Hogsmeade and any other crimes you may have committed.....well I'll make you this deal: You bring me two live bodies of some combination of Frederick Knott, Peter Pettigrew, Bellatrix Lestrage or any other Death Eater worth at least 500,000 galleons, and I will take their vaults in forfeiture and apply the proceeds toward your compensation to the business and families of Hogsmeade, anything beyond that we will split down the middle. So you have incentive to help us, rather just not to attack us. You bring me those live bodies, and you'll get your immunity, with the attendant name changes. I'll have the Hogwarts records altered for you Mr. Brandon, and I know people at Michael Collins who can do the same.” Grant wasn't wild about this, but saw it as a basis for negotiation.

“How many would we have to bring back if they are dead?” Rufus pondered this for a moment, as Bones was looking at him like he was crazy.

“Ten dead Death Eaters, but they must have Dark Marks, and one of them must be a high ranking one.”

“Done.”

“And once the last live or dead body is produced, you'll need to submit to Veritaserum questioning to claim your immunity and whatever percentage of the money. Just to make sure that you didn't do anything werewolf type bad things while you were working for us.”

“Fair enough, but I want immunity for all crimes I committed before this meeting, and Alan as well. I'm assuming that killing, torturing, or the like of Death Eaters after this meeting won't be considered a crime.”

“You assume correctly, though make damn sure that they're Death Eaters before you do more than stun them, with no biting of course.

And your immunity conditions are acceptable. Now if either of you is killed first, the other needs to come in immediately and explain what happened.”

“Done.” Rufus couldn’t think of any other demands he had for them, he turned to Lee.

“Lee, could I have a couple of pieces of parchment and a quill please?” This wasn’t the kind of thing a ballpoint pen and a piece of scratch paper was for.

“Yes sir.” He fetched them for him. Rufus did some scribbling for a minute, applied a small seal that he carried with him in his pocket, and then handed the parchments to the werewolves. Grant looked his over

This letter authorizes Edward Grant, citizen of magical Ireland, to act as an auxiliary member of The Dark Force Defense League of Great Britain. He will have Avada Kedavra privileges against any and all Death Eaters and supporters of the man who calls himself Lord Voldemort. This warrant expires the moment after Voldemort is either killed, placed in Azkaban, or I chose to do so.

Signed,

Rufus Scrimgeour

Minister of Magic for Great Britain

Brandon’s letter was much the same, and it satisfied them both.

“If any Aurors stop you and question you, just produce the letter. First things first, I want you to be debriefed about any other ‘samples’ you might have for us. It doesn’t need to be under Veritaserum, but Merlin help you if get caught in a lie at any point.” Both werewolves nodded.

“We are prepared to sacrifice our evenings for such a purpose, if you will supply the fish and chips.”

“I’ll even through in a few pints. We’ll do this at The Ministry, you won’t be under arrest unless you make the change, understood?”

“It is.”

“Good. Fred, George, Lee, Harry, you don’t need to come along, I don’t want any more attention to this than absolutely necessary, let’s face it, all four of you are distinctive looking. Since you’re going to be the contacts, we’ll get you a transcription of what’s said. I’ll be back here tomorrow to let you know what the full arrangement is.” All four nodded.

“Yes sir.”

“Good, now Harry, do you need a note for your Headmistress? I know she’ll let you do as you please.....”

“I’ve already notified her that I would be late, and why, but thank you sir.” Rufus nodded approvingly at his protégé.

“Excellent, by all means stay on her good side if you can. Mr. Grant, Mr. Brandon, let’s get going. Travis, you have another hour before duty calls, I’ll make sure you don’t miss the opening tip.” Travis looked a little relieved at that, and his boss picked up on that.

“Don’t worry my friend, Rebecca wouldn’t stop at killing you I’m sure, and I don’t want her beating the crap out of me. Let’s go shall we.” He shook hands with the WWW’s and bade them goodnight. They walked out back, outside the anti-portkey wards, and were soon gone. Harry looked at them all:

“So does this mean I keep having to be nice to Dumbledore?”

The older ones broke up at hearing that, and laughter could be heard throughout the shop. Winky came over and made some dinner for them, as they ate in the shop while Harry pretended to take his portkey stops. It’s important to note that the portkey stations that Harry was supposed to be using did not make anyone sign in or the

like, so unless Murray or Dumbledore had people there to check on him, he was safe. And even if they did, people traveled through those places in disguise all the time, and Harry was prepared, if asked, to say that he did too.

After the three hours were up, he got into the twins' trunk and went back to school. After he had left, Warrick had taken the trunk out to the Athletic Field, and hidden it under the stands. Harry emerged to an empty field, and walked the 400 meters back to school, hoping that nothing else could go wrong. He wasn't met at the door, and called for Dobby.

"Yes Harry?"

"Please have Sophie and the others meet me at Professor Murray's office, no need to tell the story twice if I don't have to, then go to Murray and tell her that I'm back and am coming up to see her. You should remain there as well, you might become involved later on and should hear it firsthand." Dobby looked intrigued, a different look for him.

"Yes Harry." He popped off, and Harry decided, for the hell of it, to go up the escalator, only the second time he had used it, the other being on it's first day. It had been a long day so far, and he was pretty tired.

He got the office ahead of the others, thanks to the escalator, and sat down on the floor outside it, waiting. It turned out that they had all been watching a movie in Shawnee, the emptiest of the Houses this Summer, and he only had to wait a couple of minutes. Sophie ran up to him as if he had been in a battle and had simply neglected to tell her.

"Are you okay?!" He got to his feet and gave her a hug.

"I'm fine darling, I was just the middleman today." Before she could say anything else, he knocked on Murray's door, and was bidden to enter.

Murray was waiting for him, along with Heyman and Greenleaf.

“Hello Harry, did you have a good day back in Blighty?” She was smiling as she said this, and Greenleaf started laughing lightly.

“Well what do you want to hear about first? The fact that two Lycan Wizards want the twins and I as their go-between with The Ministry? Or that Dumbledore wants to lay on a Quidditch game between our two fine institutions?”

No one seemed to know quite what to make of either proposal, Greenleaf found something to say first.

“So it was this man Greyback’s people who killed him and staked his head outside your store?” The teachers had had a fun time with that story over the last weeks.

“So they claim, they want to work with us.” He told the story to the rapt attention of his audience, Dobby getting now why he was in the room. At the end of the 15 minute tale, Murray leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes for a moment.

“Are you comfortable with this Harry? With those people on your side in all this? I know about Remus Lupin and why you trust him. But aren’t these two just like your old foe Draco Malfoy? Turning because they have to?” Harry didn’t see how this was bad at all.

“So?”

“That’ doesn’t bother you? Being the facilitator of mercenaries like that?” He just shrugged.

“Nope.”

That was all he said, and Murray gave him a look that seemed to expect more, and he gave them the short version of what he, Lee, and the twins had hashed out. This was not unexpected.

“Ma’am, these two guys are going to hunt down Death Eaters for us. And by ‘us’ I mean The Ministry and The League, and well, me. I have a price on my head at the moment, and every numbskull with a Dark Mark on his arm knows that to bring me in, dead or alive, will mean a lifetime of wealth and riches. Any of those people that Grant and Brandon can kill for me? I’m all for it.” This went over just as they had thought it would, Greenleaf in particular was nodding approvingly.

“You are a very practical man Harry, that is to be admired. In your position I don’t blame you a bit. It’s only two of them anyway, it’s not like there’s an entire pack.”

“I doubt Rufus would have made the deal if there were. He’s the soul of practicality, and thank you Professor Greenleaf.” Murray still seemed dubious, but realized that it was not part of her fief. She then turned to the other bombshell on the list.

“What’s this about a Quidditch game?” Harry sighed slightly, and girded himself for this part of the story.

“I was nice to Dumbledore before the meeting, for reasons passing understanding, and afterwards he pitched the idea of a Hogwarts/Great Lakes Quidditch game.” Murray looked visibly ill now, while Heyman and Greenleaf just looked bemused.

“And pray tell what did you reply?”

“That our best flyers play Quodpot and that we wouldn’t stand a chance.” The relief on her face was visible, for a second there she had been half afraid that Harry would take the dare just to try and shove it down his old Headmaster’s throat. If she had looked at Sophie and Reiko closely enough, she would have seen the same fear.

“No, we wouldn’t. You, Sally, and Warrick here are the only ones who could keep up, and I have my doubts about Sally, we just don’t have good Keepers here.” Indeed that was an American problem it appeared, of the four starting Keepers in the AQL, only one was American, the other three being a Mexican and a pair of Canadians.

“To his credit, and it pains me to say this, Dumbledore understood my reasoning and seemed to take ‘no’ for an answer.” Uh oh.

“But.....”

“I tried to head him off before he made an Olympics challenge, but he seems hell bent on facing us in something.” He had rarely seen his Headmistress look so irritated.

“Well I’ll shoot off a letter to him declining any and all competition offers. That’s just what we need around here, his political scheming interfering with your collective educations. Why that man just can’t leave you be for 10 more months is more than I can comprehend.” She took a breath and Harry sidled right in.

“I did make one suggestion to him ma’am. I said that Hogwarts should lay on its own Olympics this year, then challenge you or another school the year after. That takes away any impact I would have in the proceedings, which will show whether or not he was really serious about it, or was just doing an end around.” She nodded approvingly at him, though only for part of it.

“Well I can appreciate the deviousness of that strategy Harry, but my answer will still be no. If he’s so adamant about competing with a school, let it be Maple Leaf or Salem, where he actually gets along with the Head, unlike here.”

“Glad to hear it, he should fix the inadequacies there before trying to take on other schools. At least he didn’t suggest another Tri-Wizard Tournament.” There was still time for that though, as the Tri-Wizard was supposed to occur every four years, and it was only two years since the last one. Harry made a mental note to have Fleur ask Madame Maxime, who she was still on good terms with, about that. Maxime had not been at the wedding for reasons that Harry found to be lost in translation, though it appeared that she and Hagrid had not worked out as a couple.

“Well there are things doing on that kind of thing here, but I can’t say more until the opening feast, some details to be worked out.” Harry was very interested in hearing about it, but he figured that he could wait two weeks.

“Just not a Tri-Wizard, please.” Murray couldn’t blame him a bit.

“Well there are four schools Harry, it would be a Quad-Wizard.”

“I love having a funny Headmistress.”

“Aren’t you the lucky ones. Anyway, unless you have more harrowing tales for us to cringe at, you should get ready for dinner, we’ll see you there.” It seemed that they had more teacher type things to talk about, so the gang took off. Sophie stopped Harry as soon as the door was closed.

“Were you in any danger Harry? What if they had made the change?” Harry thought carefully about his response for a few seconds.

“Danger is a relative term Sophie. Yes, I was in a degree of danger if they had made the change. That said, I can fight wandlessly, and over the course of July and most of this month, I’ve been giving pointers to Fred and George as well. The change can’t be made in half a second you know, so we would have had time for a defense, especially in such an enclosed area like the shop. Plus, we had a pair of secret weapons, albeit ones that I didn’t know about until afterward.” He paused, forcing someone, Reiko, to ask.

“And what might they have been Harry?”

“When the twins put their wands on the counter, they did some sleight of hand and put fake wands on there instead, keeping their real ones. So if our werewolf friends had thrown down, they would have been slaughtered in short order.” He said that very matter of factly, and he had been very impressed by the twins con artistry.

“You really have no qualms about this whole thing do you?”

“No my dear Claudia Jean, I do not. War and politics makes strange bedfellows you know, it was barely more than a year ago that I was sitting in the office of Cornelius Fudge, politely asking him to emancipate me so that I could come over here and meet you wonderful people. The man had tried to have me killed, and had smeared my name all over The Daily Prophet just weeks earlier, but there I was. And he did what I wanted him to, for his own reasons. This was nothing compared with that, and is one reason that I will never run for political office after this whole mess is done.” She wouldn’t be dissuaded, though she did buy the argument on it’s face.

“So you what you’re saying is that anything can be justified if it harms Voldemort?”

“Well not anything, but these guys don’t seem so bad. I’ll take them over Draco any day.” All of them, to some degree, felt that Harry had something of a negative blind spot toward Draco. Their collective feeling was that his past experiences with his rival made him feel that anyone doing wrong to him was to be praised. Of the gang, only Sophie had actually met Draco, and while none of them were egging Harry on to forgive the ferret, they were all a little fearful of how much damage Harry would do if he got Draco alone. They had seen him study that oath agreement.

“Tell you what, later on tonight I’ll show a pensieve of the whole thing, after dinner so we can see if the faculty types will want to see it too.” He knew Lyman and Ziegler would, they were interested in anything Lycan related.

It turned out that all but one of the Summer faculty took him up on the offer, so they gathered with the gang in the downstairs conference room, the one that was always locked, and Harry showed it. Most of them were fully with Murray in that this was a gray area, allowing a Lycan access to an all-Wizard war. Harry tried to point out that Grant and Brandon were magical as well, and both had been turned against their will by Greyback, but he might as well have been talking to himself as far as some of them saw it. Still, he didn’t mind the

arguments really, as none of his actual teachers were even in the room except for Ziegler, Wash was having 'an evening out', to use Josh Lyman's words. So there was no risk in the room, and he enjoyed hearing some different views on his British issues.

That was one of many reasons that the faculty liked having Harry around: He and his issues were interesting, and a break from the norm. They had not had this kind of polarizing figure on their campus in many years, if ever. Of course it also helped that few of his issues ever reached their front door directly. There were some that could listen to Dumbledore stories for hours, be it from Harry or Professor Murray, yet none of them had any burning desire to meet the man face to face.

Not that it would happen in the near future, as unbeknownst to Harry and the rest of her faculty, Murray had gotten the magical equivalent of a restraining order put on Dumbledore, saying that he or any of his faculty could not enter the Great Lakes grounds or Flackter Alley without prior permission. Of course Remus couldn't even enter magical America without tripping off a dozen wards. The restraining order was done through The International Confederation of Wizards, and was implemented after Dumbledore's blunt insinuation that Harry had threatened suicide. Dumbledore had been duly informed of this, but had neglected to mention it to any of his faculty, other than Miss Minerva. For some reason he had not told Harry during the meeting, though McGonagall had berated him for it afterward, convinced that The Boy Who Lived had engineered it, yet another insult. Dumbledore had responded testily that he doubted that Harry even knew about it, otherwise he would have thrown it in his face at the first opportunity, this was well before the wedding meeting. McGonagall wouldn't let it go though, and all but demanded that he fight the order.

The old man disagreed with her though, for reasons he kept to himself, and had taken his medicine like a man. He reckoned that Murray would want to keep any and all distractions away from her campus, and that she was just using some preventative measures to ensure it. In fact Murray had told Harry that she would have the old man censured, but had changed her mind after Harry had left her office that day, the day they found out about Snape's untimely death.

The next day Rufus had a long talk with the twins and Lee about their roles in the Grant business. Grant himself was to be the go-between, as no one in magical Britain knew who he was, much less that he was a werewolf. Rufus and Bones had talked with the werewolves for most of the night, debriefing them on all of their activities over the last year, and what they knew of Voldemort's operation. After Grant and Brandon had departed, Bones grudgingly admitted to her boss that the deal was worth it, though she still felt uneasy about it. Rufus simply reminded her that it was just two men, both of whom were battle tested and resourceful. They were going to fight for someone, it might as well be for The Ministry.....and for Harry.

Fred and George weren't told this of course, but what they were told was that this was to be top, top secret. Not even Arthur and Bill were to know about this, much less Remus. They weren't worried about Remus per se, but decided that he had enough to deal with without the moral implications inherent with this deal.

Saturday, August 23, 1997

Springfield, Illinois

Noon

Sophie and Harry exited the floo station at the Greyhound bus terminal as planned.....the only part of this plan that Harry liked in truth. Wendy Weir had been sending increasingly insistent letters to her daughter over the last few months, wondering about a possible visit. Sophie had put it off as long as she possibly could, but had let it slip in a letter that she had spent a month in Wales. She hadn't reckoned on the effect that tidbit would have with Mother Weir, and the guilt trip was laid on hard and heavy in the letters after that. Sophie had finally caved in and gone to a sympathetic Murray, asking permission for her and Harry to spend the afternoon and evening with her parents and brothers. It had to be this weekend, as Jason and Ned were moving into their apartments the next day. Jason was starting graduate school at The University of Illinois, his brother's school, where young Ned was starting his Sophomore year. They

weren't living together in the same apartment, but were in the same sprawling complex on the edge of campus.

Murray had no problem with it, and so arrangements were made. There was to be barbeque in the back yard for lunch, along with a lot of visiting, then a nice dinner at a Mexican type restaurant that was Peter Weir's favorite. Harry was dreading every second of it, though Mitchell Baylor had assured him that his previous visit to Casa de Weir had been part of the material Obliviated from Peter Weir's mind. Sophie wasn't exactly excited either, despite the prospect of seeing her father for the first time in over five years. She spoke of this to Harry as they walked the mile from the floo station to the Weir home.

"He's still the man who kicked me out of the house for being a Witch. Now that I understand his reasons a little better now, but....." Harry was more than a little relieved that they agreed about this.

"Hey, I'm with you, I would rather not be here at all. Every minute I was with your mother back in January I wanted to smack her." No, he was not actually tempted to do so, but the urge was there.

"Thank you for not doing that." She couldn't really blame him, she had some pointed questions to ask her mother as well.

"I'll make any sacrifice for you Sophie, and that was a big one." She let go of his hand and smacked him on the arm, then re-took his hand, digging in. Sophie grew her nails out a little, and whenever she was nervous about something, Harry always had indentations in his palms during and afterwards.

"It's only going to be once this year, we can do it." She tried to sound resolute, but still only sounded nervous.

"Make sure you dodge and weave about Thanksgiving." Sophie seemed to be wavering slightly about the big Hollow plan, even though it was her plan in the first place.

"We could put in an appearance."

“Well I vote that we wait until the end of the night before agreeing to that.” Sophie was all for that one.

“Motion carries.” All big decisions, and this qualified, had to be unanimous, though Harry still gave in more than he didn’t. He wasn’t whipped exactly, he just liked seeing her happy.

“Good, good. I’ll let you explain to your brothers why we didn’t spend three seconds considering their school.” That was the least of Sophie’s worries this afternoon.

“That’s easy, they didn’t go to middle school and high school in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and I did, with all its attendant blizzards.”

“You guys exaggerate all that, last winter wasn’t so bad.” They argued about this, good naturedly, for the rest of the walk. Their official travel story to Peter Weir is that they had taken the bus all the way down from Chicago, where they were staying with Jonas’ family, and had decided to walk the rest of the way. Wendy, Ned, and Jason knew the real story.

They got to the front door, and Sophie looked uncertain for a moment. This was her house, should she ring the doorbell or just walk in? She hadn’t been here in just over five years, it didn’t feel like home any longer, it was like an aunt and uncle’s house, not that she had either, her parents being only children. She turned to look at Harry:

“Ring it? Walk in?”

Harry kissed her on the cheek, squeezed her hand, and then rang the doorbell.

It was opened very quickly, as if Jason had either been waiting near it, or had seen them coming up the walk.

“Hi there you two, come on in. Sophie, you don’t have to ring the bell here, this is your house.” It was nice to hear that, and Sophie relaxed a tiny amount as she came inside. She looked around as she

did, seeing the same familiar sights, as her memories flooded back. Peter and Wendy had bought this house right after Ned had been born, two years before Sophie, tying in with the promotion of Peter to Senior Associate at his law firm.....so this was the only house Sophie and Ned had ever known, and being back inside hit her like a ton of bricks. Her knees buckled a little, and it looked for a moment like she was going to faint.

She rallied though, as her mother and father came in to the foyer. Wendy immediately enveloped her daughter into a tight hug, which helped steady her, while Peter held out his hand to Harry, a friendly smile on his face.

“You must be Harry, I’ve heard all about you.” At this moment Harry was all too aware that he was the main reason this man had been Obliviated, but he managed to shake his hand without giving anything away.....Jason and Wendy were watching him very closely as it was.

“Likewise Mr. Weir, nice to meet you at last.” Peter hugged his daughter tightly, as though he somehow knew that he hadn’t laid eyes on her in over five years.

“Call me Peter, come on into the living room. Ned’s out back getting the grill going, he’s a genius at that kind of thing.” Harry’s first grill experience had been at his birthday party a few weeks earlier, so he took the man’s word for it. He didn’t know what to say here really, but thankfully Peter seemed to be a bit of a gabber.

“So how was the bus ride down? Not too hot I hope?”

“It was fine sir, as those things go, I haven’t been on too many of them.” Only to the SAT’s and back since he had left muggle primary school. He was trying to stick as closely to the truth as he could, if only to make it easier to remember the lies and half truths that would be needed here today and in the future with this man.

“Good, good. Your accent’s pretty thick Harry, it’s a wonder that it hasn’t faded since you’ve been over here.” Mitchell Baylor had sent Sophie, at Drew’s request, a complete dossier on just what Peter

Weir knew of her situation and what he didn't. He was under the impression that Sophie was attending the Great Lakes ghost school, and that she came for a visit once a summer.....which would account for him the reason that there was so little of her in the house. Wendy and the brothers had filled him in about Harry, telling him the truth more or less, aside from Harry being famous and that he was magical.....oh, and he wasn't a Quidditch star, he played soccer, like the stereotype of every British kid. Harry would have loved to have told Peter that his 6'4" African-American roommate was the real soccer player, but chose to save this for a later time.

"Well we just spent a month back in Britain, that probably did it." He personally had no clue about his accent, and didn't care either way, except that at Great Lakes his accent was unique.

They chatted about Britain for a time, Jason joining them as they walked outside to meet up with Ned at the grill. It turned out that Peter had done a semester abroad while at The University of Illinois, and had done it in London. So he knew the city better than Harry did, and so Harry was forced to go through every foreigner's worst nightmare: answering questions about his home country that he/she did not necessarily know the answers to.

He got through it though, and took comfort from the sounds of friendly chatter coming from the kitchen. At least it sounded friendly.

In reality, Sophie was getting a motherly quiz on Harry, and whether there were any wedding bells in the future, and that hopefully there were no buns in her oven. Sophie didn't mind the first five questions about it, but it eventually got a little old, at least Molly Weasley had quit after three.

"Come on Mom, leave it alone. I'm committed to Harry and he is to me, that's enough for now. He won't even be 18 when we graduate next year, there's plenty of time." Wendy swung to a slightly different tack.

"Isn't he some famous person in your world? That Baylor person said something about it, and I checked with your grandparents and

they confirmed it.” That gave Sophie a start, she hadn’t seen her paternal grandparents in over a decade, and her father rarely even mentioned them.

“When did you talk with them?” Wendy checked to see if anyone else was in hearing range, but the door was closed and the boys seemed engrossed in their conversation.

“After your father had his procedure done.” That’s how she and her sons referred to the Obliviation.

“How did they take it?” Neither of the brothers nor Wendy herself had mentioned this in a letter.

“They were actually relieved, they thought that his bitterness might dissipate some.”

“Has it?”

“Yes it has, though I think he’s still sad that he can’t do the things that his parents can do.”

“Well as long as he no longer takes it out on me.” Sensing trouble:

“That’s what we all hope honey, which is why the two of us and your brothers need to keep the secret.” And with that, the first cracks in the dam started to appear.

“There’s something about this that I just don’t like Mom, keeping a large part of me hidden from Dad. Why could you just never tell him the grow the hell up?” Wendy Weir had been waiting for something like this, a topic that had not come during either of their visits during Christmas Break, and one that Sophie was unwilling to put into a letter.

“I did try Sophie, I never stopped trying. I only went along with it in the first place because I thought that you would stay here, and we could work on him together. I was sure that I could talk him into

relenting if you were right there with me laying the guilt trips, you wouldn't have missed a day of school, we had two months to do it after all."

"That's not how it seemed at the time, you were right with him. And you never mentioned any alternate strategies as I remember." No she hadn't, but unsurprisingly, Wendy had a response to that.

"I couldn't help you if he turned on me as well."

"You didn't help me at all though, did you? You could have sent me clandestine letters for years, just like Jason and Ned did." Sophie wasn't yelling these accusations out, but her tone of voice was still very hurtful to Wendy.....even more so because the woman knew that she deserved every bit of it.

"I'm sorry about that Sophie, I truly am. I should have done more."

"Yes you should have, that's why I haven't been so eager to come here to visit this summer." Wendy had surmised as much, but tried one last guilt trip.

"We have missed you, we always did."

"Not enough Mother, not nearly enough." Sophie walked as calmly out of the kitchen as she could. She was very grateful that she wasn't carrying her wand right now. Harry had both his and hers in a special holster lightly strapped to his back. He had had Dobby make it for him after seeing the Scottish soldiers in Bravheart with their claymores and things strapped that way. Only this was under his shirt, a loose one where the outline didn't show. He never went anywhere anymore without at least his regular wand, if not the Tom Riddle one as well. It was all Sophie could do not to go out there and demand that he let the curses start flying. That bothered her a little now that she thought about it, after all, Harry had somehow kept his temper with Dumbledore, after hearing far, far worse.

She wandered outside to see what the boys were up to, and saw that the beer had been broken out. Jason and Ned were both college men,

and they adhered to the stereotype that most college men like beer, they and their father each had a bottle of Newcastle, in honor of their English visitor, who was having a Coke himself.

“Are you boys behaving out here?” Harry was about to take a swig of his drink:

“Nope.” Sophie was half tempted to pour the Coke on his head, but compromised by snatching it and draining it, dropping the empty can in his lap.

“Thanks, that hit the spot. May I borrow my man for a moment?” She didn’t wait for a response and fairly yanked Harry from his chair. Ned and Jason, both single at present, dissolved into laughter, while Peter looked confused. Harry just followed along obediently as they went to look at Wendy’s small garden.

“Mother Weir getting on your nerves already?” Harry loved the look on Sophie’s face whenever he called Wendy that. He had given in on ‘Wotcher’, but not on this.

“I’m getting Dumbledore flashbacks here, it’s like I’m stuck in some Groundhog Day scenario.” He had never heard her sound so frustrated.

“Please tell me that.....”

“Oh she’s sorry, she just didn’t do anything to try and see me for five years. That must have been some pre-nup that Dad made her sign.” Harry somehow managed to keep a straight face as he took this in.....though in fact there was no prenuptial agreement.

“I would prefer to believe that she was just confused by the whole situation, and caught off guard by the fact that you didn’t capitulate.” She flinched a bit.

“That’s just what she said.”

“Hey, I’m not defending them, by no means. You want to leave now, we’re gone. But if we’re going to be here, we might as well get things worked out.”

“I defer to your experience, you managed not to kill Dumbledore or Remus.”

“So we’re leaving? Terrific, that beer they’re drinking stinks.” Harry hated beer in all forms but butterbeer, which wasn’t really beer anyway. He made to leave, but she didn’t let go of his hand and he didn’t get very far.

“No, we’re not leaving, just don’t leave me alone with my mother or things will happen.”

“Good thing I have your wand.” Something occurred to her, thankfully not in front of Wendy.

“I can do Repulsar without a wand.”

“I love it when I’m the calm one.”

“Once a year darling, and this is the once.” He kissed her on the cheek, and led her back to the guys. Harry sat on one side of the picnic table and guided Sophie down next to him.

“Sorry about that, I needed to be yelled at for a moment, what were we talking about?” The male Weirs found this to be very amusing, and things were pretty calm for awhile.

They soon got to talking about colleges, and all three male Weirs attempted to sell The University of Illinois to them. Sophie, who had dodged this topic when writing her brothers in the past, was unwilling to make any more conflict with family members, so Harry rescued her.....sort of.

“It’s all Reiko and Warrick’s fault really, they refuse to budge on considering Northern based schools. I mean I was all for

Northwestern myself after hearing Jason talk about it last January, and Sophie's been promoting your school to the hilt, but we were outvoted you see, the desire to be near a beach was what did it. Overrated if you ask me, but the will of the group and all that." To Sophie's ever loving astonishment, the guys actually seemed to buy this crap, Harry's hastily improvised revenge for being put on Keisha and Marty watch by the Davis sisters. Peter seemed to be taking a shine to Harry, which was odd, but nice.

"I think it's great that that the bunch of you are all going to school together, my high school friends and I mostly went our separate ways, some to school, some to work or the Army. Sophie, what's your first choice for college?" Her reply was immediate:

"The University of Hawaii. That's OUR first choice, right Harry?" It was, now that Harry could afford beachfront property. He could just floo across to Death Valley to play his Quidditch, he was getting giddy with the thought of it, only 10 months and change away.

"Yes ma'am." For some strange reason, Peter never asked how all this was to be paid for, though Wendy had offered to start sending money again in a recent letter.

Wendy came out with the salads and more drinks, as Ned started putting burgers and brats on the grill. Awkward silence ensued, as all three male Weirs attempted to divine just how bad things were between mother and daughter. The problem was, none of them had the minerals, or stupidity, to come right out and directly ask. When Wendy went back to the kitchen, Harry volunteered to go help her.

"I need to get my interrogation over with." He followed her in, and before she could say anything he struck:

"Mrs. Weir, you knew there would be a bill due for five years of inactivity, and here it is. My advice to you is this: You just have to ride it out for the time being, and don't make any more mistakes, then you'll be fine. That she's here at all is proof positive of that." Wendy didn't argue with that, and in a tired kind of voice:

“Did you have to talk her into it? Coming here today?” Harry had decided months ago that Mother Weir, despite her Christmas Break turnaround, didn’t deserve much sympathy from him.....especially from him, as he knew all too well about family betrayal.

“I tried to talk her out of coming, though not too hard. There’s no way I would have let her come without me though.”

“I know what you must think of me, of Peter.” He held up a hand.

“No, I actually have some compassion for him, in a way. His childhood upbringing in our world, combined with his squib-ness, clearly drove him a little bit mad, and it was manifested when Sophie got her letter and in the months afterward. No Mrs. Weir, the villain here is you, even if the villainy isn’t truly evil in any way. You had no such excuses, no reasons for inaction other than inertia.”

“Is this you talking? Or Sophie?”

“A mixture of both. Keep in mind that Sophie and I wouldn’t even be here if Warrick and I hadn’t made the first move back in December.” A move that Warrick had done everything he could to talk Harry out of, but to no avail.

“I’m not trying to defend my inaction, I just want to set things right with my daughter so that we can be a family again. I know I have no right to expect that, but all the same that’s what I want.” At least she was honest, and gained a single brownie point in Harry’s eyes.

“Then just keep doing mea culpa after mea culpa and things will be fine eventually. Just don’t figure on great leaps today, accept that fact that she’s here at all as victory enough. I’ll help you as much as I can, within the limitations of me being totally and completely on the side of your daughter on this and all other matters.”

“She’s lucky to have someone like you, so loyal.” Harry really hated it when the words ‘lucky’ and ‘loyal’ were used in the same sentence and for the same purpose.

“I’m the lucky one ma’am. Now we should get back out there before someone thinks we’re actually fighting.” He grabbed some napkins and left the room. No questions were asked about his absence, and things were a little more pleasant for the rest of the afternoon. Peter had just been nominated for a Federal Judgeship, and his morning had been spent preparing for his confirmation hearings. An appointment like that was for life, and he would be based out of Chicago. Since all the kids were out of the house, some more voluntary than others, they were talking about selling it.

This was a nice, safe topic, and even Harry wound up having an opinion on it.....keep it but rent it out was his view, since it was already paid off and there wouldn’t need to be simultaneous mortgages. Ned agreed with him, while Jason and Sophie were of the opinion that they should just sell it and buy something nice in Chicago. Nothing had to be decided today, but they had a lively discussion about it, and more of the tension drained away. Harry described Godric’s Hollow to them, giving the major fib that most of his wealth was tied up in having a nice house, and an education fund leftover from his parents, who had died in Petunia’s made up fantasy of a car crash.

Ned could cook a mean hamburger as well, and another topic was Harry being able to put away four of them and not going into cardiac arrest, and they all had cheese on them to boot. He declined dessert only because the looks he was getting, the apple pie looked pretty good.

“I have a really fast metabolism.” The men looked envious at that ability, while Wendy just looked disgusted.....disgusted that she didn’t have the same, though she was a bit underweight if anything. Ned had put on the Freshman 15 in the last year, and hadn’t really dropped it just yet, while Jason and Peter would have been best described as having average builds. Harry told them about his evil relatives, leaving out certain parts, and explained that that’s how he could inhale an entire buffet and not gain an ounce. Which was a lie of sorts, he had gained five pounds in the last year to go with his extra inch in height. He still had a six pack though, from all the sit-ups he was doing.....and a few other things as well.

So Sophie told the story of the Christmas bet between Harry, Jonas, and Martin Forrester, and Harry, just to torment them a little, described haggis to everybody. He had never tried it himself, but the description was always good for some interesting reactions. Peter, for one, thought it didn't sound half bad, he had not tried it during his summer in London.

"You should make that the next time you come over, I'm sure that some kind of specialty store in Chicago has the more esoteric of the ingredients." Harry was brought up a bit short, as his bluff had been called.

"All right then, I will. But everybody has to promise to take at least two bites. It's a bit of a bother to make, and I don't want to go through all that and have everyone gagging." Actually that would be pretty fun, or so he thought, so it was a win either way. He was warming to this idea more and more, surely Dobby could teach him how to make it.

Everyone seemed to agree to this, and things turned to favorite foods for awhile. During the discussion Harry went inside to use the facilities, and Jason followed him, ostensibly to show him where they were.

"So how do you think it's going Harry? Are you glad you came?" Well.....

"I am, but was your Dad always like this? He's a friendly sucker." Harry wasn't sure if this was good or bad. It was good in that he didn't want any more arguments than were already on his schedule. It was bad in that they might be forced to come here more often, and Sophie seemed to be itching to tell her dear father that she was a Witch, consequences be damned. This itch might fade after awhile, but Harry was a little on edge from watching out for it. The word 'magic' had yet to be uttered this day, though everyone save Peter was sure thinking it.

“I think he’s trying to put on a good show for his daughter and her boyfriend. He usually isn’t this jovial, but I don’t mind. How is Sophie?” Deciding that the man needed the truth, Harry told it to him:

“She’s more pissed at your Mom than I thought she’d be, but I think the worst is over.” They were now at the bathroom, and Harry did his thing, then Jason as he continued the conversation after those pauses for the cause.

“This whole thing has come a long way in the last year, and we have you to thank for that.” Harry just waved him off.

“I’m convinced that Warrick or Reiko would have done the same thing once they had wand rights and could go threat for threat. That’s what was holding them back, and nothing else.” Warrick had hinted as much, thought his intent with his wand was to do more than threaten, or so he claimed. Jason seemed to pick up on that.

“I could tell that he didn’t like us very much.” No, he really did not.

“He’s always been very protective of Sophie, or so I’ve heard.”

“What are you guys going to do about Thanksgiving? I know that they’re going to want you over here.” Harry wanted no part of that himself, and tried to head Jason off, gently.

“I don’t know Jason, that’s the problem. If we don’t use magical means, its hundreds of miles to get from Great Lakes to here, and our campus isn’t near any major airports. How do we explain how we got here? I mean if we use magic it would only take a few seconds, but your Dad.....” That truly had not occurred to Jason, nor Ned either.

“I don’t know, I guess you’re right. No need in giving him any suspicions that we don’t have to. It’ll be easier once you guys are done with that school.” Oh it would be easier for more than just this, Harry thought ruefully. In truth he barely thought of Sophie’s family, since she so rarely brought them up.

“We’ll see what happens come Christmas time, just make sure that the lid stays on here and we’ll all be the better for it. Sophie trusts you most of all to make this happen.” Jason reacted much the way Harry had hoped he would, puffing up a bit with pride... ..as well he should, being the only one in the family who had never forsaken her. Harry treated his future brother in law with kid gloves for precisely that reason.

“Well I won’t be here to make sure, but Ned and I will do what we can. You just keep looking out for her at school, and for the love of God don’t get her pregnant, or you’ll have to use that stick against all four of us.” They were almost at the kitchen door now, and Harry started laughing, and liked the fact that this opportunity came up.

“Well leaving aside that our birth control is foolproof, you don’t want to tempt me to throw down on your parents Jason, you really don’t want that. I’ve been forced to do things that you couldn’t possibly imagine, and your father, altered or not, is still the man who booted the woman I love out of her house for being magical. And your Mum is still the one who let him do it.” To his credit, Jason didn’t flinch, and Harry respected him all the more for it, the guy had been kidding anyway.

“Why do I not like the sound of this?”

“Just be wary of any shotgun threats Jason. Obliviation is not 100 percent, and if his ever fails?” He didn’t continue that, and Jason Weir was reminded of the moment in January when Harry threatened to go have a talk with a yet to be Obliviated Peter.

“You’ve killed people? I understand that there’s a war on in your world over there.” That must have come from the grandparents, Harry thought, correctly as it turned out.

“I have done what’s necessary to survive Jason, nothing less. You and Ned need never fear me though, I can promise you that. You stood by her when she needed you.”

“It wasn’t too hard, she’s my sister, I love her.”

“And she loves you too, and Ned too. She just has issues with your Mom right now, but they’ll get worked out.” Probably, he didn’t add.

They headed back outside to find that Sophie was now telling her brother and parents about the Jefferson Quidditch game, except that it was the Jefferson ‘soccer’ game now, and she was doing quite a nice job with it, drawing out the tension and the like. Given her earlier ambivalence, Sophie was warming to the task of ‘muggle-izing’ her school experiences. Harry found himself looking forward to her version of Voldemort, but she didn’t get there before the end of the afternoon.

The evening’s entertainment was a play at Wendy’s school. She was not involved in it in any way, except that many of the performers were her students. They did Romeo and Juliet, and Harry was reminded very vividly of eight years ago, when a sympathetic teacher had cast nine year old Harry as a featured extra in this same play at his primary school. Petunia had done her best to stop it, but the teacher had felt very sorry for Harry and had insisted on his participation. This was a high school production, but enjoyable all the same, it was something different at the least. Harry and Sophie had not made it to London’s famed theaters while they were in Britain for the month, though they planned to rectify that the next summer if possible.

They ate out afterward, and the subject of Thanksgiving was broached by an oblivious, pun intended, Peter. He even volunteered to buy the plane tickets for them, but they demurred long enough for Harry to say that they would talk it over with their friends and see to the logistics of it. He was rewarded under the table by the digging of the nails into his leg, hard, but he somehow kept a calm face. He managed to head off a ride back to Chicago, as Peter was more than willing to do that, insisting that the night bus was good enough. The bus station was only three blocks away, and after dinner, the two youngsters said their goodnights and were off. As soon as the Weir-mobile was out of sight, it had been a tight fit with six of them in it, Sophie turned to Harry, and with her sweetest smile:

“We’ll consider Thanksgiving? Really?” Her loving boyfriend threw up his hands.

“I had to do something to shut them up, neither of your parents seemed willing to let it go.” Sophie opened her mouth to argue, but realized that he had a point.

“I’ll concede that I guess. That was.....I don’t want to do this again anytime soon Harry, it was just too much of a strain for me.” For us both, Harry thought but didn’t say. He was exhausted himself, and hadn’t done any magic since the floo trip many hours earlier.

“We have to spend a day here come Christmas Break you know, it’ll look really bad if we don’t.”

“Again, I’ll concede that much. But nothing until then. Thanksgiving Day we’ll do our usual routine, then the day after in Wales, then the island.” She wasn’t getting any arguments there, no way shape or form.

“Yes dear.”

“Oh be quiet.” She was smiling though, perhaps more from relief that it was finished than anything. They walked on to the Greyhound station and ducked into the magical entrance. As they prepared to throw the powder in, to get them to Flackter Alley.

“Thanks for this Harry, I know it’s not what you would rather have been doing today.” It wasn’t, in a perfect world.

“Where you go, I go.”

“Isn’t it your luck that you have a girlfriend with a messed up family?”

“I don’t know if I could handle a normal family Sophie, it might shock me and I would never recover.” She pulled him close for a moment.

“It helped, having you there with me.” Harry’s heart went all gooey hearing that, he loved that feeling, and her.

“Just as you helped with Dumbledore. He’s alive and unhurt because you were in that room.” This was true, Harry disliked the idea of doing any of his Voldemort type ‘wetwork’ in front of Sophie.

“Don’t break the mood honey.”

“Yes dear.” He kissed her, and they flooded home.

Saturday, August 30, 1997

Great Lakes

9:00 am

It was the first day of school, and the Novices started arriving bright and early, classes always began on the first Monday of September. They were all required to be there by 10:00 am, so that they could be given a quick mass orientation, followed by the traditional tour around campus, led by the Seniors. Seniors were also required to be back by 10:00 am, and Jonas was there bright and early, trailing Drew by about 10 minutes. A super chipper Jonas snagged a barely awake Drew and hightailed it over to Cortez 7B, Chipper Jones himself wasn’t this chipper. Rick was just leaving the room, it had not been re-Pinked yet, and Drew and Jonas looked at still sleepy looking Harry and Warrick.

“Come on you two, wake the hell up, it’s a great day! The first day of our last year in school!” Warrick just yawned and pointed at Jonas.

“Kill him Harry.” Harry got up and stretched, he didn’t like sleeping without Sophie next to him, they had felt that it would be better for the roommates to not see anything as they moved in, even if it was only someone leaving the trunk.

“Don’t tempt me mate. Why the hell are you so damn happy Jonas?”

“Beats me dude, I’m just in a good mood today. I think I might even have missed this place.” Harry motioned to Drew.

“Check him for a flask of Polyjuice will you? This can’t be our boy Jonas.”

“I already did, he terrorized Mark and Lester before he got to you guys.” Harry still had in the back of his mind to prank the crap out of those two at some point, though there had still be no outward incidents in the last year since his arrival.

“Well it’s Jonas then. What time are the cousins getting here Warrick?”

“9:30 I think, we’d better make sure that they’re in our group for the tour.”

“Yeah, Rachel Kessler’s little sister is starting too, she asked me to make sure we get her with us. There was a note attached to her most recent WWW order.” Rachel was one of the few single girls who had resisted Jonas’ charms, so he was always interested in news of her.

“How did she respond to Marie’s buying spree?” They had written him about it.

“She ordered \$50 worth of Outer Monologue Candy for starters. She’s always been a steady buyer rather than aping Marie’s splurge at any given time. I’m going to hit the shower.” And so he did, using the one in the trunk, with Warrick using the one in the main room. Jonas and Drew resisted temptation to mess with Rick’s or Terry’s things, and waited somewhat patiently for their friends to get ready. Warrick, knowing this, took an extra long time in the shower, taking advantage of the fact that magically maintained hot water never runs out. Harry was through and back in 10 minutes, and was a few seconds away from sending a Fire Hose Spell of cold water into the bathroom when Warrick emerged. They collected Sophie, Claudia and Reiko, and went down to the arrivals area.

The arrival area was the Dining Hall, breakfast and lunch being served in the Lounges this day, and all of the tables had been temporarily removed. There were two portkey areas, leading from Milwaukee and Detroit, where there were government officials and Great Lakes teachers there to shepherd the youngsters on their way. All the non-Summer students came to school this way, and there were arrivals every two minutes, right on schedule. As happened last year, Dobby and Winky volunteered to help with baggage detail, and were busy all morning stacking the bags in the hallways. A change of pace from the shop and now Godric's Hollow, which was still in one piece even after a month of the twins and their ladies living there.

Keisha and Marty arrived right on time, and a few minutes earlier than Anna Kessler, who had been told by her older sister to find 'The Boy Who Lived' and report to him. Just listen for the English accent and look for scar, were her instructions. Anna was short, even by 11 year old standards, but had the same nose and smile as her big sister, who was a year behind the gang. Lyman, who along with Heyman, did double duty during the summer as the 'explainer of all things' to muggleborn Novices and their stunned families, herded a few more students Harry's way. They were joined by Rick and Laurie, Nicole and Terry, and Marie. This wasn't all of the Senior class of Cortez, but a good deal of them. Nicole, Laurie, and Marie were the equivalent of Sophie, Reiko, and Claudia, and were there so that better relations could be established.....though Harry was adamant that the Map 2.5 would include Marie at most, and no others, at least until graduation and he gave it to Marty and Keisha, probably. He was already enjoying the potential of that.

So the gang and roommates took the six youngsters on a tour of the campus, much like the one Sophie gave Harry, in what seemed like years ago, but was really 13 months. Marty was in 'mock the crap out of my cousin' mode, and peppered Rick and Terry, who he had been hearing about for years but had never met, with questions about Warrick. For example:

"Is he as big an idiot here as he is at home?"

"He hogs the bathroom, doesn't he?"

“Was a he a real loser with girls until he blackmailed Reiko into going out with him?”

Rick and Terry both got a lot of laughs out of these questions, but weren't about to have the wrath of Harry brought down on them by going along with the theme.....they currently enjoyed blanket immunity from all pranking and weren't about to screw up that kind of deal, they were always warned ahead of time too, Harry wanting good relations with the two of them. So they assured Marty that Great Lakes, and their obvious influence, made their cousin a changed man once he returned to campus every year. Harry listened to all of this with half an ear, and an occasional smile, but didn't join in either way.

Warrick took all of this with grace heretofore unseen by most, but in reality he was plotting revenge. After all, he had access to knowledge about his cousin's every move, via The Map 2.5. Keisha was getting to know Reiko a bit better, she had immediately pegged her as the smartest and coolest of the bunch. She didn't get any digs in at Warrick, but was obliquely trying to figure him out through his girlfriend.....trying to figure out how much he was going to write her mother and aunts about her activities.

Eventually it fell to Drew of all people to stop all of this, and he took the cousins aside for a moment, as the others walked ahead of them at the Athletic Field. He had only just met them this morning, but he had heard all about them, and they about him.

“Look you two, here's the deal: Warrick and all the rest of us are not about to lie to your parents, so whenever we get asked direct questions, we will give direct answers.” He paused, hoping that they would get the message.....and they did. With a crafty look.....well, crafty for an 11 year old, Marty replied:

“That leaves a lot of unexplored ground Drew.”

“Yes it does. Just don't make us look bad, and we'll do the same for you.” Keisha nodded, she liked this guy.

“I doubt anybody will mess with us, having you fine people at our backs.” That was the understatement of a lifetime.

“Just don’t abuse it, if there’s one thing Harry doesn’t tolerate, it’s stupidity. Mistakes yes, ignorance yes.....stupidity and arrogance, not so much.” At Easter Warrick had regaled his family with Joe Clancy turning Pink, and how Harry had basically stopped him from farting in church with a few well chosen words.

“We’re not about to mess with him, don’t worry.”

“Well just keep in mind the warning, and you’ll be fine.....and you’ll be part of our pranking activities.” Drew left them to think about that as he rejoined the others, leaving behind two kids with greedy looks on their faces. Warrick dropped back to talk to him.

“Thanks for that, I appreciate it.”

“I’m the only one in our gang who followed siblings here, I know just what they’re going through.”

“Bad?” Warrick hadn’t been friends with Jonas at that point, so he had barely known Drew except as the quiet kid in some of his classes.

“Difficult at times, my sisters weren’t wild about the idea of looking out for me.”

“And you didn’t want to rat on them to your parents?” Drew shrugged, something he did a lot.

“Well there was nothing to rat about really, they just chucked me into the deep end of the pool to see if I could swim.” Warrick looked fairly appalled.

“That was nice of them.”

“It was a way to go.” Drew was not close with his sisters as a result of this, though there were no outward bad relations. He had won the magical lottery of the three, with his intelligence and his power and ability.....so his revenge was paid off in that.

Warrick pondered this for a minute, while idly listening to Harry and Reiko regale the other Novices with tales of Quidditch, which they explained was the far superior sport of the two that were offered. Jonas didn't even try to compete with that, he knew that all American magical children grew up loving Quodpot, and that Quidditch was barely second, and had to compete with muggle sports for attention and good athletes.....which is why Harry had gotten another letter a few days earlier from American Quidditch League Commissioner Janet Evans, asking for a meeting to make a personal pitch to him. Harry was intrigued enough to write back to her, saying that they could have lunch on the day of the first Quidditch doubleheader, and that he would listen to whatever she had to say on the subject.

Soon the tour went back inside, all the Seniors were dodging questions about the Sorting, but felt free to talk about the teachers. These kids would have Wash, Ripley, and Maloney in their Transfiguration, Defense, and Charms classes, and they were told what to do and not to do in their first few days.

“Try not to vanish a teacher's chair if you can help it, right Warrick?” Oddly enough, they were now in Charms Classroom B, where the incident had occurred.

“Very funny Rick, I seem to recall that you gave yourself a hernia from laughing so hard.”

“Yeah, but I'm not the one Heyman has had it in for ever since.” Rick and Terry both had made a point of being as unobtrusive as possible over the years, being in a room with a suspected narc, Joe Clancy, and the attention loving Warrick. Warrick noted that much for the crowd.

“But you’re not part of Great Lakes lore my friend, while mine is a story that will be told for years.”

“You can only hope.” Rick and Laurie took turns telling the story, one that Warrick had neglected to share at holiday dinners, and Marty for one looked very impressed.

“If you can say with a straight face that you did it on purpose, I might actually have to respect you.” Warrick all but laughed in his cousin’s face.

“And you would immediately blackmail me by threatening to go to Heyman, I know how your rotten little mind works.” Marty made no effort to deny the substance of that.

“Eh, it was worth a shot.”

“If only you had been a squib.”

“Just your tough luck oh cousin of mine.”

“You’ll have six years here without me, then you’ll be sorry. Just wait until Ozzie starts here, I’ll make sure he knows how to punish you.” Marty’s brother Ozzie was eight years old, and was due to start Great Lakes in 2000, assuming he got the letter of course.

Lunch was served in the room, and the other Novices: Colin Sullivan, Mike McDermott, Michelle Kresge, and Sherry Johnson, all got in questions of their own, though they were enjoying the family by-play. Included were:

“Where’s the nearest town? Can we go there?” Reiko:

“Seney is the nearest town, and we are absolutely not allowed to go there, or anywhere else muggle in this area. The only time we interact with the locals is when we take the SAT’s, and that won’t be until 2003 for you folks. That’s a one day thing, they get a bus for us and the Caretaker drives us over there and back.” She didn’t mention

Warrick's soccer playing, Murray having more or less squashed that due to security concerns.

"Who is the meanest teacher and how can we avoid them?"
Claudia:

"There is no consensus 'worst teacher' in school. It kind of all depends on your own temperament and what you react the worst to. I know that's not what you want to hear, and Harry here could tell you Hogwarts stories about his teachers there that would turn your hair white, but it's really a mixed bag here. Professor Murray doesn't tolerate abusive teachers."

"How often do we get to go home?" Nicole:

"During Thanksgiving and Christmas Breaks for sure, and during Easter for the day. You'll use portkeys to get there and back, no need for plane tickets or things like that. Otherwise, there are no weekends at home unless there's a family emergency, there's enough here to keep you busy. You don't have to go home during the Breaks of course, that's up to you and your parents to decide."

"Are we going to get bullied by the older students?" That was the tricky question, and Jonas tried to answer it.

"No one is going to beat you up or anything, if that's what you're asking. Will you get teased a lot? Probably, but there's no out and out harassment, unless you start something yourselves, in which case the upperclassmen will make your lives hell." That was no answer really, especially from Jonas, who loved a Novice hazing as much as anyone, but no one contradicted him. Claudia attempted to help him:

"Just make sure that if you see any bullying, you tell an upperclassman about it, any Junior or Senior who seems sympathetic will do. If they do nothing, then go to one of your teachers. Try to keep it among the students if you can though."

"What about church? Is there a service Sunday morning?" Sophie:

“Yes there is, it’s a non-denominational Christian service that Professor Mendoza conducts. He’s not a minister or anything, he just knows the Bible really well. Any Jewish, Muslim, or students with other religions can go to Professor Murray and make arrangements separately.” Religion was not something that was emphasized at Great Lakes, and the services were sparsely attended for the most part. Harry went about once a month on the average, by himself or with Drew, which was a lot more than he had done with the Dursleys, both Vernon and Petunia being agnostic. They had always gone on Christmas Day, just in case. One reason Harry had declined Advanced Muggle Studies was that one Sunday a month of Mendoza’s soporific mumbling was enough for him.

After another hour of this, Lyman came and got the Novices, who needed to have their wands checked out, as well as a cursory physical exam by Dr. Murray, husband of the Headmistress, who volunteered to do this kind of thing every year as a favor to his wife and Dr. Carter, who was busy at Salem doing much the same thing. The checks weren’t really a big deal, just making sure that there were no muggle diseases or conditions that needed to be taken care of.....and to make sure that no Charms of any kind had been placed by overprotective parents, which was something of a problem at times, especially in mixed blood homes. The exams took about five minutes each, and were totally painless and non-invasive.

The gang and roommates stayed in the classroom and caught each other up on their summers, getting the assimilation process going, as Harry wanted. Marie hadn’t been kidding before, her roommates knew just who the pranksters were all the last year, and they had some ideas about stuff to do in this one as well, this being their last year and all. Harry had his scheming face on while listening to this, and Reiko finally asked him what was up.

“I kind of got things going already with the pranking.” Eyebrows went up, this was news even to Sophie.

“You didn’t do anything to those poor kids did you?”

“Oh please Reiko, not on their first day.” Their second day maybe.

“Who did you hit?”

“Just don’t go into Proctor House today, that’s all I’ll say.” Our man Ray Elwood was not a summer student, nor was his roommate Jack Straw, and they were the only two people likely to help Harry in there. All of the gang knew this, and Harry was badgered into giving over.

“Well I used our old standby of loading up the doorknobs, but I time delayed it so what I did won’t kick in until tomorrow. I did it last night after we all went to bed, it’s really quiet in the hallways here during the summer you know.” Warrick and Reiko knew that all too well, even if they had been given use of the spare trunk for the time being.

“You’re not going to tell us what you did, are you?”

“Do you really want to know Claudia? Given that none of you are going to be hit with it, I would have thought that the surprise would kind of nice.” Fair point, and they all conceded it.....until Marie thought of something.

“Okay, you said that the Novices wouldn’t get hit their first day, right?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“How are you going to unload the doorknobs before dinner? They’ll get nailed when they go up their after the Sorting won’t they?”

“Excellent question my dear Marie.” That’s all he said.

“I notice that you’re not answering it.” The scheming face was still firmly set.

“Again, do you really want to know?” She considered this.

“No.”

“Good, you’ll like it, I promise. Being that it’s Proctor all signs will point to us anyway, but I don’t mind.”

Talk soon turned to life after Great Lakes, something that was weighing heavily on all of them, as 10 months didn’t seem like such a long time now. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, and Harry was going to ask some hard questions to Sophie, Reiko, and Warrick in particular about why there hadn’t been better relations with these people, all of whom seemed nice enough. In fact this was far and away the most words he had heard out of Nicole and Laurie, in class or out. There was no question yet about expanding the membership of The Map 2.5, the twins’ names were still on it even though their next appearance at school wouldn’t be until the first Quidditch game. Marie in particular still didn’t know about it unless Drew had let something slip, and he had assured Harry that he hadn’t.

Soon enough, they were called into The Dining Hall, where Cortez was lined up on the far left side, with Jefferson taking the position of ‘honor’ on the far right, as the holders of The Carver Cup, though this was a new thing this year. This was the only day of the year that Houses specifically ate together, and the Cortez members of the gang snagged a table for six, two spots being left open just in case Marty and Keisha were Sorted into Cortez and they wanted to sit with them. The chairs were lined up from left to right: Cortez, Shawnee, Proctor, and Jefferson. Cortez’ chair was first this year, which an openly grumbling Harry said would have better suited him when he really needed it.

When all the non-Novices had taken their seats, Murray rose from hers.

“Welcome one and all to the 1997-98 academic year. The Sorting will commence in a few minutes, and I want to remind all of you to keep everything to polite applause as usual. These youngsters will be nervous enough without you adding any more drama to their days.” She gave the nod to Riley Poole, who was standing by the door. He left, and a minute later came back with Professor Heyman and the 45 Novices, the least in quite some years, solely due to the vagaries of where magicals had settled and where muggleborns just happened to

pop up. Next year's Novice class would wind up being 56 kids. In this one, Marty was either the tallest or deputy tallest, depending on how you counted his 'fro, and he and Keisha were toward the front, though everything would go in alphabetical order.

Murray explained to the Novices how the Sorting would go, and the first student, Ronnie Ackerman was invited to go first. Ronnie, whose blonde hair rivaled Draco's, didn't much care for the idea of going first, but he walked calmly up to the Cortez chair and hopped on. Nothing. Shawnee, nothing. He found a home in Proctor though, and the first one was settled in. Everything went smoothly after that, for the most part, there were no beyond terrified kids as had happened the year before, so Warrick's coaxing services were not needed this year, to his everlasting relief.

Marty was up fifth, and he strode somewhat confidently up to the Cortez chair, laying a big friendly smile on Professor Murray as he did so. He didn't think it would be a tragedy if he didn't get Cortez, but it was his first choice.....and bingo, the chair lit up right away, and Cortez had it's first Novice of the night. He slapped hands with Warrick and Harry, but didn't sit with them, preferring to stake out a spot at an empty table. He was a little wary of seeming to be the gang's mascot, at least at first, but didn't mind everyone knowing that he had connections. He was soon joined by four others at his table, including Mike McDermott and Michelle Kresge from the tour, and they made a point to save a chair for Keisha, all the while commenting on the Novices as they came up to the chairs.

Keisha wound up going 35th, Peterson being further down in the roster than it usually would be. She seemed more nervous than Marty, but didn't waver as she sat down on the first chair.....nothing. Well, it's not like they would have let her and Marty room together anyway, not that they would have really wanted to, they weren't quite that close. Though people could tell that she was a little disappointed, she quickly got up and sat in the Shawnee chair, and Presto! She looked relieved that it was over, and went over to a table filled with other Shawnee Novices, though none from the tour group. Claudia, sitting at a table with her roommate, looked half pleased and half worried, knowing that she was to be more or less responsible for the younger

girl. Keisha seemed a lot sneakier than Marty, who thus far had shown himself to be kind of brazen. Thus far.

The Sorting soon ended, with Shawnee getting 12 kids and the other three Houses getting 11. Murray stood up and everyone fell silent.

“Welcome to the 180th year of The Great Lakes Magical Institute!” They weren’t silent anymore, as the Seniors were particularly loud. This was a big day for them, their last opening feast, in an academic year that would be filled with ‘lasts’ for them.

Murray gave the introduction of the teachers, none of whom were newcomers, the third year in a row that this staff had been together, a Great Lakes record. Lyman got the biggest cheer as usual, no surprise there. Ripley got a rousing ovation too, much had been made on the grapevine in the last six months about how he had been badly injured, twice, during the Lycan invasion, but had still kept fighting. After Lyman’s applause died down, Murray had some more things to say.

“A few changes are occurring in our routine this year, all for the better I think. The other Headmasters of the schools and I have been meeting over the last few weeks to discuss more integration of our schools. As many of you know, since you all pay attention in History class, the Olympics used to be contested between all four schools against each other, every four years. The last time this happened was 1974, when it was abandoned, due to various judging irregularities. Headmasters Shupe, Morrison, Clary and I have decided to give them another try. So the week of Monday June 8 through Saturday June 13, Salem will host the first American Magical Olympics in 24 years. We will still hold our school Olympics during May as we always do, and classes will be shut down both weeks, though you can expect some longer-term homework assignments. The structure of the four school event will be much the same: Three students from each year will compete in each event, so a full field event will be of the same dimensions as they would be here. Students will be chosen for their events strictly based on their Olympic performance. So students that dominate their events here will be selected to hopefully dominate there.” She paused as everyone turned to look at either Harry or

Drew. Now the gang knew what Murray had been talking about in her office that day, after Harry's deal with Grant.

"Yes, I know we all have contenders in mind. More details about logistics will come over the next months, there is plenty of time for that. Anyway, Quidditch and Quodpot tryouts are two weeks from today, if you wish to tryout please go see your House's Captain for details on what he or she wants. Our first Flackter Alley trip will be the second weekend in October, with a Halloween party coming soon upon it's heels. Our Christmas Dance will come the day before you leave for home, as always, though it will be a couple of days later this year as we attempt to make up time for the extra Olympic week." She paused to take a sip of water, the entire room hanging on what she was saying, though the bombshells were finished.

"Your class schedules will be handed out tomorrow. We've done something new this year, in that we have endeavored to leave the times and places as unchanged as we can from the year before, aside from Sophomores and Juniors, who have added or deleted classes. For example, our Senior Class will have the same slots as they did last year." Monday afternoons off for Harry, he could be seen smiling largely.

"Any other questions you might have, feel free to talk to any of the faculty for answers. Now let's enjoy our first official meal of the term." She sat down, and soon there was food on every table. The Cortez gang, minus Marie, kept the conversation light and easy, and focused more on what the first days of classes were going to be like. Greenleaf had let it slip about what the first day of Basic Combat was to be dealing with, and the three in that class were eagerly looking forward to Tuesday.

Once dessert was done, the Seniors led their Novice charges up to their dorms, where the house elves had already put their luggage and such. Warrick and Harry stood on either side of Marty and led him and his 10 other brethren upstairs to Cortez. Five of the Novices were boys, and they were all piled in one room together, the elves having made it a rather larger one after finding out that there would be an extra person. The girls were three to a room, and the Senior girls

made sure they all got settled, and that an agreement for bathroom time was provisionally reached. Claudia was doing the same for Keisha in Shawnee, and seemed to be enjoying the job of being a mentor.

Sunday was spent exploring the school, and doing some flying. Marty was a good enough flyer that Warrick could put him on the Cortez reserve squad with a clean conscience, and he was bigger than Billy Amend, who was perhaps his competition for the open Beater slot. Warrick was somewhat wary of show favoritism to his cousin, but Cortez was riddled with conflicts of interest like this, with Reiko and Harry both on the team as well.

The entertainment portion of the day was provided by the Proctor folk, many of whom had Pinocchio style noses. They didn't grow because of lies, just because, though only up to a foot. That was enough though, and the gang got a lot of stares at dinner, as Harry had set a 36 hour delay on the spell he used.....with the spell fading away gradually, so not everyone's nose was full length. It was quite a tricky little Charm he had used, and some Proctor students were using gloves to get into their Lounge. After lights out Saturday, Harry had snuck over to Proctor, which was on the same floor as his own dorm, and wrote on the wall:

“Prongs.”

Just that, and not one person beyond the gang had a clue of what it meant. Which was just how Harry liked it. Even though Dr. Pepper and Snapple were now graduated, the twins, Harry fully intended to use their names in future pranks as well. Always mess with their minds.

Monday, September 1, 1997

Noon

Great Lakes Dining Hall

Harry's first and only class of the new day had been Regular Transfiguration with Wash, and as always, the first day was pretty

much review. Harry sat and partnered with Marie, and while Wash was working with other people, he felt free to question her about some things.

“So how are you and Drew doing?” She looked surprised, as if she assumed that Drew would fill him in nicely already, which he did. Harry wanted to hear her side though too.

“We’re doing great, he’s a wonderful guy. Why?”

“Just curious.”

“And? There’s more to it than that.” Harry and Marie had never had a one on one conversation longer than 30 seconds before, so he was unclear of how far to go. This was kind of the feeling out period, so to speak. Harry more or less got to the point:

“How involved do you want to be in our activities Marie?”

“You mean the pranks and things?”

“That too, but I’m talking the whole shebang, if you will. Marie, we all like you, you went over great at The Hollow, but I don’t want to force confidences on you that you would rather not have.”

Marie, in all honesty, had been wondering when this pitch would be coming. She had long seen how tight knit the gang was, and had been a little surprised at Reiko’s and Sophie’s overtures during the Olympics. She had seen how Claudia had been maneuvered into dating Lee, keeping everything in the family, though both were certainly willing and ready. For her part, she had wanted no part of dating Jonas, which all three of her roommates had done at some point, Nicole twice, but Marie had always kept something of an eye on Drew.....which was rewarded when Reiko got it in her head to be a matchmaker.

“I’m in Harry, all the way. But I won’t sacrifice my other friends.” He had been hoping to hear just that from her.

“I would have thought less of you if you hadn’t said that about your friends Marie.” He stuck out his hand, and she quickly shook it.

“So what do I have to do?”

“Well it’s kind of a gradual process, and you’re already partly there, knowing about Britain and Dobby and Winky and such. We’ll do something tonight or tomorrow in my trunk. Start thinking up a nickname for yourself.” She grinned, and lowered her voice to a bare whisper.

“You’re Prongs I take it?” Not a hard guess that was, he had all but told them on Saturday with his news about the prank.

“You’ll find out at the meeting won’t you?”

That was the first step, putting her on the now getting crowded Map 2.5. The next step was telling her about the trunk floo, and that would take some more time. Drew wasn’t making it an issue though, even if it would make Thanksgiving, just three shorts months away, and Christmas go that much easier. Marie was college bound like the rest of them, and she had looked very interested in the top 10 that they had picked out for themselves. Thank goodness for floos, they could all go to a different school individually and live together if they wanted to, though that would make it hard to bring a muggle home with them or anything.

Class went by very swiftly, with Harry being called upon to do a couple of demonstrations like everyone else. Last year there had been two weeks like this, but since pretty much everyone had spent at least half the summer with wand rights, there wasn’t the need for a lot of ‘how do I wave this stick around again’ type moments. The next class would be a detailed summary of what would be expected of them for NEWT’s, something none of them were looking forward to. A lot of the Seniors in the Regular classes would be getting Senior-itis pretty early on in the year, and much of Wash’s attention would soon be on those students actually trying, which would be about half the class. Until May, then it would likely be Harry and maybe five others, tops.

As Harry and Marie got to lunch, Dobby was waiting for them with a letter. It was from Ginny.

Dear Harry,

How are things over there in Great Lakes-land? Things are actually pretty good here for once I don't mind telling you. The train ride was uneventful, though the Prefects meeting was a hoot. Poor Ernie MacMillan is already out of his depth, trying to be a take charge kind of person. I wasn't sure who was going to yell at him first, but Lisa Turpin finally got things organized. Don't tell Hermione I said this, but Lisa will do alright as Head Girl. I talked to Padma and she didn't mind a bit, I guess she didn't want the job.

The big news is that Neville and Hermione were chosen to head the DA, though that was a dust-up too, as Remus' faction apparently threatened to go to The Minister and tattletale on Dumbledore if he didn't do it. The two of them aren't ranked tops in Defense, that's Terry Boot and Theo Nott, but the special instruction you got for them this summer made it hard for Dumbledore to say no. The meetings will be every Sunday, and Neville said to tell you that your input would be appreciated. I'm sure I don't know that means, but please do it. There won't be a rogue DA now, I don't think, unless the regular DA goes all strange on us. It'll free up some time anyway, though thank Merlin I don't have NEWT's this year, and that OWL's are finished.

Ron was named Quidditch Captain, McGonagall said that he couldn't be Captain and Head of the DA as well, and it was an easy choice for him. Too bad really, I would have been Captain otherwise, but I can wait a year. He's really excited about it Harry, we're getting along pretty well now, if only because we talk about Quidditch so much. Oliver really helped him out that day at The Burrow, I hope you manage to sneak over for a game. I won't tell Ron that you'll be there though, he might get nervous and screw it all up. Hermione is doing a great job pretending that she cares about our wonderful sport, but I wonder if their relationship would not be better off if Ron doesn't play professionally. I don't see her taking it for too much longer, but I've been wrong about her before.

Dean says hi by the way, he brought back a lot of cool souvenirs from his trip, I guess he saved most of his WWW money to spend on them. The twins have put him and Seamus right back to work too, I guess they're spending all their time inventing up new things. Well I guess you know all this, seeing them all the time like you do. I forgot about the thing for a minute, the one I'm not supposed to spell out. I'm sure Dumbledore can't get his mitts on these letters, but you never know.

Anyhow, I hope you had a good opening feast and whatnot, those cousins of Warrick's sound like they're going to run you ragged, so good luck there. Take care Harry, be good.

Love,

Ginny

Harry didn't pass the letter around the table, as the veiled reference to the trunk system would cause uncomfortable questions from Marie. He was pleased on the whole though, he didn't think that the old man would do the logical thing with the DA. This was welcome news, and would allow Harry to push Dumbledore further to the back of his mind, at least for the next couple of weeks. The League meeting for September was in less than two weeks, right before the Quidditch tryouts. Warrick had already gotten them the last slot in the afternoon, so that shouldn't be an issue. He had a bad feeling that it would be though, his luck was running too good lately.

Tuesday, September 2, 1997

9:00 am

Front Entranceway of Great Lakes

This was the first day of Basic Combat, with a slight twist. The first day of this class for Seniors was always a visit to The Auror Academy in Boston, so that any Auror inclined students could get a firsthand look at where they might want to be a year from now. There were eleven of them now, waiting for Professor Ripley to return with the portkeys, as Jack Straw, our Olympic runner-up, was the top person

last year in Regular Defense. Ripley hurried up, they were on something of a tight schedule.

“Is everybody ready? Good, slight change of plan, we’re going via floo. We’ll go from Professor Murray’s office to Auror Command in Boston, and the Academy is right next to it in the main government building. Let’s go up the escalator, it’ll be quicker. Sorry Harry, you’ll have to suffer.” Everyone laughed, as Harry’s refusal to use it was well known.

“I’ll live.”

The 12 of them, including Ripley himself, went upstairs and got to the Academy in short order. They were met by Elizabeth Profeta, the Head Auror in Charge of the Academy. She was in her mid-40’s, and had a very academic look to her, glasses and a stiff back look to her. She and Ripley were old friends and colleagues from his Auror days, which is why his people got such an early slot to do this, as all the Basic Combat students from the four schools did. She and President Chabon were not what one could call ‘tight’, her appointment was forced on him in a political deal, so she had not been a member of the School Defense Commission. Harry had heard varying things about her, but Ripley had sung her praises in private, as had Greenleaf.

They spent the first hour just looking around. The American Auror Academy was not multi-national as the British one was, and had about 15 cadets at the present time, including two June graduates of Great Lakes, and one from the year before. There were four main classrooms of varying sizes used for the students, the teachers were all regular Aurors who were on detached duty for six months at a time. It was a 10 hour a day curriculum, with Sundays and major holidays off, and cadets were drilled in offensive spells, surveillance, and other law enforcement type things. The American Academy was considered one of the better ones in the world, and tried very hard to get the best Basic Combat students.....all others need not apply, no matter what their NEWT scores were, a lot of children of Aurors had found this out the hard way.

After their tour, a couple of the second year cadets were brought in to a conference room to feed them all the usual propaganda about how great it was there, and why it should be the number one priority of all of them to try and gain acceptance for the slots open. There had been a large number of retirements in the last year, so nine had been admitted in the current class of first years.

Harry listened to the various spiels with a sense of interested detachment, since he would not have to come here, even in the unlikely scenario that he went to work for the American Auror Command. He spent some time people watching during all this, and Liesel Matthews and our man Ray Elwood seemed to be the most interested. Certainly of the gang, only Drew was really interested in going into Auror training, and he was not quite as interested as he had been a year ago. It seemed that being part of a crowd like he had been in the last year had made some changes in him, made him wanting to at least go to college and have fun for a time. If he started at the Academy at age 22, that wouldn't bother him.

As for the rest of the gang, Claudia and Reiko were both focused on teaching, Claudia in History and Reiko in Charms. Reiko's problem, though, was that there were few slots opening up anytime soon, at least in The United States. Both Great Lakes Charms teachers were under 30 years old, with her Tecumseh based parents being only 41 years old apiece. Drew's mention of her going to work for his mother was getting more and more play in her mind, though she had not seriously talked about it with Warrick.

Sophie didn't have a clue of what she wanted to do, and was in no hurry. Working in the muggle world or getting a graduate degree of some sort was pretty appealing, but she had four years plus to decide. Warrick had a standing job offer from his Nike employed grandfather, and his Uncle Antonio had hinted that he would put Warrick to work in his charitable foundation if it was something he might be interested in. Jonas and Harry were all set themselves, just waiting for their respective drafts.

Harry had been running this over in his mind for the last few moments, and was jerked out of his reverie by Profeta standing and saying that lunch would be served in a few moments, and just to sit tight. As

everyone was leaning back, talking amongst themselves, a head poked into the room.

“Tom, you mind if I borrow Harry for a moment?” It was Mike Jacobson, who was the Auror-in-Charge.

“Sure Mike, take all the time you need.” Harry got up, to the stares of all the non-gang members. He knew Jacobson well from the Commission, but Chabon had been true to his word when he said that it wouldn’t be public, so most people didn’t know it existed, let alone that Harry was on it.

He walked outside and shut the door carefully behind.

“What’s up Mike?” The first sir from Harry had been waved off back in February.

“I got a message from Britain this morning, there has been a development that you should be made aware of.” His thoughts immediately went to WWW, and his eyes went very wide.

“What happened?!”

“Oh it’s nothing urgent Harry, otherwise I would have come right over with it. No, Travis Biller wanted you to know this.” He paused, and Harry was now even more curious.

“It can’t be that bad, if you didn’t need to tell me right away, can it?”

“Rufus Scrimgeour and Albus Dumbledore had a lunch meeting today, where among other things, they discussed the date for the October Dark Force Defense League meeting.” He paused again, hoping that Harry would spare him the telling of it, and he was rewarded as the younger man worked it through out loud.

“They’re on Saturdays, at noon.....and Ginny said that the last two Quidditch games were doubleheaders so that the League and the Aurors could better protect the spectators. Oh bugger.” He said that quietly, and Jacobson was relieved that there was no great eruption.

“Yes, the meeting will be at Hogwarts.”

End Chapter

Author's Note: I said in the last A/N that the Harry's Sorting was in Chapter Five, but it was actually in Chapter Six.....I mean my goodness, I can't even remember when stuff happened in my own story! Speaking of that, I had Basic Combat go in the morning and Muggle Studies in the afternoon, when in Junior Year they were the opposite. You see, this is why Dobby kept banging his head. Also, a reminder that our Wormtail here has very little to do with the Timothy Spall version in the Azkaban, Goblet, and Phoenix movies. It's an interesting portrayal, but not how I see Peter Pettigrew.

Tuesday, September 2, 1997, continued

Noon

The American Auror Academy in Boston

“Yes, the meeting will be at Hogwarts.”

Harry didn't know what to say at first, he was turning it over in his mind every which way, with a totally blank expression on his face, at least for a few moments. He wasn't gesticulating or anything of the like, so no one in the conference room could tell that anything was amiss.

Meanwhile Jacobson, the Auror with the most Lycan kills in the entire Command, was more than a little nervous watching this teenager sort through his anger, or what the man assumed to be anger. Biller had warned him, over the telephone, about two things in particular:

A: Don't let him near President Chabon until he calms down. Biller wouldn't put it past Harry to make a direct appeal of some kind involving the International Confederation of Wizards, and Harry wouldn't want Rufus in the middle, so he would go to Chabon. At least that's what Travis was dreading. Harry had had nothing but good things to say about Chabon, and Travis assumed that it was likewise, and that the American President wouldn't mind doing a favor for Harry.

More important, and a lot more likely was:

B: Do your level best to talk him out of summoning Dobby. Nothing good would come of it, and a lot of things bad.

Harry snapped out of it after about three, very long in the life of Mike Jacobson, minutes. He walked out of view of the conference room, and the older man had no choice but to follow. In a curious tone of voice:

“Is there more to the story Mike?”

“Not much more. I guess Dumbledore claimed that he was booked solid on the Saturdays other than the Quidditch day, and Rufus had a choice of either calling him a liar to his face, or acquiescing to the schedule. He reluctantly chose the latter, it was a short conversation with Travis, no need to get the muggle NSA and their snooping satellites too interested in our goings on. It's October 4 if you want the exact date, for the meeting. He said he would talk with you more about it next week at the September meeting. He just wanted you prepared is all.” Travis was nothing if not smart, and he had gotten to know Harry and his tendencies very well in the last year.

“And he wanted any tantrums to be away from Dumbledore's ears.” Harry was still calm, and Mike was starting to relax too, now that the worst seemed to be.....well it seemed not to be happening at all.

“I'm sure that was part of it.”

Harry started chuckling, and it took a minute to control himself. Once he calmed down he made as if to leave.

“Let's go back in there please, you will want to hear this.” Intrigued, he followed Harry back inside, where his young friend explained what the deal was about. Harry had gotten to know the non-gang members of the class pretty well during Junior year, so he didn't mind giving them some insight into his Dumbledore issues, as Bill always put it. Reiko was the first to query him.

“So what's he playing at?”

“I think he’s playing a multi-level game here Reiko, and it’s pretty fascinating.....or it would be if I wasn’t the opponent. On the one hand, he’s showing that he still has some power left, that he can dictate terms, not only to me but to The Minister.” He never called the man Rufus in front of non-family. Or to the man’s face for that matter.

“And on the other?” This was our man Ray Elwood.

“It’s a taunt, and a pretty hard one to duck. He’s saying ‘Is the big bad Boy Who Lived afraid to come into Hogwarts?’” Ray couldn’t resist.

“And you’re not I take it?”

Harry’s voice turned a little cold, though he took no insult, he liked Ray. But this was his ‘talking about Dumbledore’ voice:

“I’m not afraid of anything in that castle.” And he wasn’t, he really wasn’t afraid of much in general anymore, other than Sophie deciding he wasn’t worth the hassle, or something bad happening to someone in his slowly widening circle. Speaking of Sophie:

“Just like that? You’ll just walk into that school where your life was in danger for five years straight as if nothing could go wrong?” Harry now smiled, it was the obvious question to ask, and he was only surprised that she hadn’t asked it right away. He had a quick answer too:

“The Minister would flay Dumbledore alive, or preferably allow me to, if I so much as get a hangnail while I’m there. The twins and I are going to strut in there like we own the place, and dare that old codger to try any shenanigans. Everyone will be watching both of us very carefully, friend and foe alike.” All smiles now from the other students, even from Ripley and Jacobson, who had just been observing. Jacobson and Rufus went way back, the American had dealt with him often while Rufus was Head Auror. Ripley appraised his student carefully.

“You’re very politically savvy for a 17 year old Harry.” Privately Ripley thought that this was not necessarily a good thing either. Surprisingly, Harry seemed to agree with him.

“Well Professor Ripley, I learned the hard way that the more attention I paid to my affairs, and those capable of interfering in my affairs, the better off I was going to be. I would give anything if it didn’t have to be like this, but I have to admit it does make life more interesting at times.” Ray had one more question, as lunch was mere seconds away.

“What will you do if your buddy Dumbledore does try anything rash?” Harry knew that a straight answer here would not be to his benefit if anything did happen at that meeting.

“I’ll just let nature take it’s course Ray, no more no less.” Ray just started laughing at the non-answer, and Harry was laughing right along with him as he took his seat.

Lunch was served next, a hasty 30 minute affair, and the tour continued on after that, with no further drama. The kids got back for their afternoon classes in good order, with Harry getting back for Muggle Studies with two minutes to spare, none of the other Basic Combat students were in his class. Ziegler wound up giving a detailed 90 minute talk on what the NEWT would involve, and then his introductory lecture on Wall Street. Senior Year Muggle Studies was not about one general topic, but a series of vignettes, seldom lasting more than a couple of lectures.

Afterward Harry stayed behind to fill Ziegler in on the new developments. Ziegler in point of fact was an associate member of the International Confederation, his parents were incredibly rich and influential Wizards in America, so he had met and dealt with Dumbledore before.....and he now revealed to Harry the existence of the restraining order, feeling that it was time.

“Professor Murray felt that it would be best not to tell you until you got back this Fall. She didn’t want you throwing it in Dumbledore’s face in the heat of the argument she was certain you were to have

with him during your summer.” Expecting him to be pissed about having it kept from him, Ziegler was surprised when Harry just nodded his head.

“She’s right, I would have, and I’m glad she thought of it like that. But I won’t taunt him about it now, let him wonder.” Ziegler knew his next offer would be turned down, but felt that he had to make it anyway.

“Is there pressure you would like any of us to bring to bear for you? We could always deny you permission to leave school.” Harry immediately shook his head.

“No, they’ll know I put you up to it, and that will cause more problems that it will solve. No Professor Ziegler, come hell or high water, I have an appointment at my old school in a few weeks.” So it would seem, and like Jacobson and Ripley before him, Ziegler was amazed that Harry was so rational about the whole thing. So amazed, in fact, that he asked Harry that flat out.

“I would have thought that you would be.....well I would say ‘more’ upset, but you don’t seem upset at all.”

“I am, I’m just trying really hard not to show it.”

“You’re doing a remarkable job at it.”

“I just wish that bastard would let things be until I graduate. I swear Professor Ziegler, he’s more trouble than Voldemort, at least in the last year.” Ziegler privately reflected that life would have been a lot easier for them all if Dumbledore would just keeps his hands to himself, so to speak.

“Why do you think he did it?”

“To test me I’m sure, he wants to see what I’ll do.”

“And what will you do?”

“I have no earthly idea sir, and that’s the truth.”

“Does this violate the deal you struck in July?” Oh would that it did, Harry thought sardonically.

“Not technically, and I thought of nothing else but that during lunch today. No, trying to irritate me isn’t a crime, sadly enough.” Ziegler chuckled.

“Well if there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“Thank you Professor, I value your advice very highly.” And he did, Ziegler had a detached way of looking at things that contrasted with the ever emotional Josh Lyman, his other favorite teacher.....if Lyman had technically been his teacher at any point instead of merely being his summer tutor. Though while he would use Lyman’s first name, even inadvertently in front of Murray at times, Ziegler was always Professor Ziegler. For 10 more months at least, then he would probably be Toby.

“I appreciate that Harry, now go get ready for dinner, I’m sure Sophie wants to quiz you by herself on what happened.”

Boy did she ever, though she waited until they were alone at least.

“Are you insane!? Going back into that castle is just begging for trouble.” To his credit, Harry didn’t back down an inch, though there were times he partially agreed with the insane part.

“What would you have me do Sophie?”

“You mean besides not go!?”

“I’m not asking you to give me a reason dearest, I’m asking you to give them a reason that they’ll accept. The trouble with that? There’s no such thing.” Harry was not raising his voice here, he had long prided himself on never doing that in their rare arguments and this

was no exception. They were in the privacy of the trunk right now, and Harry was ever grateful for it, as months of giving ground in these arguments finally came to a halt.

“Who is ‘they’ exactly?” Harry ticked the list off on his fingers, needing both hands.

“Let’s see: Dumbledore, Rufus, Travis, every Weasley, that git McCrae, everyone in magical Britain, quite a few people in magical America, and last but not least, myself. You think I won’t be mocked until the cows come home if I don’t show up there? McCrae will have this information on the front page of The Daily Prophet tomorrow, and speculation will soon begin on whether I’ll show. Leaving aside that I owe Rufus for all the tutoring, we’re talking thousands of galleons worth of time that those people put into training all of us, mostly paid for by my attendance at these boring ass meetings so that Rufus can say he and I are shoulder to shoulder in the fight against the Death Eaters, Voldemort, and whomever else is stupid enough to take us on.” He wasn’t quite yelling at the end, but it was in the mail. Sophie was taken aback a bit at his vehemence, but didn’t surrender so easily.

“He’s trapped you Harry.”

“Yes.”

“But you’re afraid you’ll look like a coward if you don’t go.”

“No my love, I won’t ‘look’ like a coward if I don’t go. I’ll be a coward.” She still didn’t like this.

“What if this blows up in your face?”

“It won’t. Like I said in front of the others, Rufus won’t let that happen. He got outmaneuvered here, sure, but that’s only going to make him that much more wary of the next thing that Dumbledore tries. Never forget that Rufus, like Murray, dislikes Dumbledore just as much as I do, and for mostly different reasons than me. No Sophie,

I'm going to be fine there. My only outward enemies will be the Slytherin kids, and not even all of them." She grasped at a straw:

"Let me go with you then, or at least take Drew along. I know the twins and Bill can fight, but one more wand won't do you any harm. Say it's a ride-along." Harry didn't think this was a half bad idea, assuming Murray and Rufus both went along with it. One problem.

"What's a ride-along?"

She explained it to him, and he thought the idea was a good one in theory, aside from one tiny detail:

"Well it'll be Drew if it happens, not you." Sophie wasn't the least bit surprised.

"You don't want me in any danger?" Harry and Sophie both were caught in a trap: If there was no danger, as Harry suggested, why should she NEED to come along? If there was no danger, as Harry suggested, what was the harm if she did?

"There won't be any danger, at least from Dumbledore, but I not take the slightest chance with your safety, not ever. What I'm wondering is Voldemort, and I hope that the powers that be are wondering about this as well." Sophie could agree with that much, and she more or less decided to table the matter until Harry came back from the next League meeting, to be held in the friendly confines of The Leaky Cauldron.

That night in the trunk, the early discussion was all about Dumbledore, and what Harry should or should not say to him at the September League meeting, and whether or not this was just Dumbledore stretching every possible meaning of the word 'détente' or the beginning of something more. The others pretty much agreed that Harry had to show, or he would be finished for good in Britain, reputation-wise anyway. Three days before the opening feast, the old man had finally forwarded his list of questions to Harry, they were mostly softballs that seemed specifically designed not to irritate him. A couple stood out, and included one whopper:

“If the Defense Against the Dark Arts teaching position were available in a year’s time, would you be interested in filling it?”

Either Remus had told Dumbledore that Harry knew about the plan, or the old man just assumed that Remus had shared it, it didn’t matter. Harry had simply replied to that one:

“Not at the present time.” Though there was a lot more that he wanted to add, but Sophie and Reiko talked him out of it. It was probably a good thing that Dumbledore had pulled this new crap after the questions, there had been 15 in all, were answered and sent back. The other question, though had not seemed a whopper, at least it hadn’t been then:

“Would it be possible for us to have 20 minutes, semi-alone, after the October Dark Force Defense League Meeting? You and Bill, Filius and I.”

This question had raised no red flags at the time, aside from why October and not September. Harry had assumed that Dumbledore either wanted the détente to gain more traction, or the old guy simply had things to do after the September meeting, ones that had nothing to do with him.

Yeah, not so much.

Harry had responded in the affirmative at the time, but surely the old man knew that all answers were subject to change at any time. He was still leaning toward the meeting though, and was somewhat disappointed that McGonagall was not to be involved, sooner or later she was going to level one insult too many and he would go to town.

The other event that night was Marie’s induction into the Map 2.5, though she was still thinking about a name even as she was shown the Map, and like the others before her, it hit her like a ton of bricks.

“Where the hell did you come up with this?” This was the first time any of them had ever heard her swear, even Drew, even though it

was in an awed tone of voice. Harry told her the story behind it all, and Marie was privately very impressed that she was being let in on this, even with Drew to vouch for her and all. She poked around the Map for five minutes before she said another word, until Harry prompted her. Again.

“Well Marie, the time has come for a nickname. The only qualifier is that it should be something meaningful to you, and won’t look stupid when magically written on a wall. Okay, that’s two qualifiers, but never mind.”

She smiled at him and came to a quick decision.

“Okay, I’m going to be B.C.”

“After the comic strip?”

“No, my cat growing up was named B.C., he died last year and I think it would be a cool way to honor him.” There was, now that Reiko and Sophie remembered it, a picture of a Siamese cat on Marie’s dresser, though they had never asked about it. It was a good name, ambiguous as to who she might be, aside from roommates and past boyfriends perhaps.....okay, just roommates then.

Seeing no objection, Harry did his thing and put B.C. on the Map. There were now 10 names on it, and the print was a little smaller than it had been back in September, when just six adorned it. There would be no more, at least for a year, until he reluctantly passed it on to Marty and Keisha. That was the plan anyway, and like most long-term plans there would be hitches.

“Okay Marie, you are now officially a Marauder.”

She beamed at them all, her best feature was her smile and it was present in all it’s glory here.

“Thank you, all of you, this is quite an honor. I would like to thank the Academy, my agents.....” She was pelted with caramel corn before she got another word in, which stopped her before she bowed

or anything. Her smile was still large and in charge as Harry took the floor again.

“Now you lords and ladies are to get the poker game going, while Marie and I go on her maiden pranking voyage. It’s a ritual for me, one that I enjoy.” Everyone started snickering.

“One that you made up when Drew came on to the Map and skipped with the twins.”

“Details Claudia, details. Besides, the twins wouldn’t let me come.”

“And they always outvote you do they?” Well yeah.

“I pick my battles thank you. Let’s go Marie, I have something in mind for us to do, won’t take 15 minutes.”

“We’re doing a prank now? At this time of night?” It was still pretty early, and the halls would not be empty.

“Adds to the spice of the prank.” He got up to leave, and Marie followed along with him, the others were now debating on the choice of music before getting down to UNO, as they decided without Harry and Marie. Once Harry and Marie got to the hallway, she felt free to question him, thankfully Harry’s dorm room had been empty. Some questions might have been raised if the two of them in particular had been seen leaving together, and no one else.

“So where are we going?”

“The library. It’s the one main place we haven’t hit yet, aside from Drew’s and Jonas’ roommates, they’re coming soon.” Marie had once gone out on a date with Mark Phillips of that room, and was all for terrorizing him and his crass roommate as much as possible.

“What are we going to do?”

“You’ll see when we get there. Now first things first. You understand that you cannot tell your roommates or anyone else about the Map, right?” They stopped right at the doorway leading to the Lounge.

“I figured as much, and don’t worry, I won’t.” She had assumed that this kind of warning was coming at some point, and Harry wasn’t being mean about it or anything.

“Good, it’s one thing for them to know about the pranking, or even your Marauder nickname. That’s okay, but the Map is another. Murray likes me, but she won’t like the idea that we have the ability to know where everyone in the school is at any given time. The more people that know about it the better the chance that something will inadvertently slip. I won’t even be telling Marty and Keisha until Spring, hopefully.” He figured that Warrick would let something slip though, then ice water in the basement would soon follow. Along with some Obliviation perhaps too, Travis had taught him personally.

“Mum’s the word, I promise.”

“Good. I don’t like telling people what they can or can’t do Marie, but this is different.” She nodded that indeed it was.

“Don’t sweat it Harry, I’m noticing that you’re giving me this spiel after I went on the Map, and not before. I appreciate that.”

“Well you can be trusted.” So far, he thought, but he was smiling.

“Thanks for Drew too, I don’t know how much you had to do with that.....”

“I didn’t really have anything to do with it, that was Reiko and Sophie.” That could be taken a few different ways, and Harry quickly realized that before she could take offense. He really needed to learn how to do this better.

“Not that I objected or anything, I’m just not a matchmaker or anything of the like.”

“Except with Lee and Claudia.”

“Well, that was more Fred and George, and it had the added benefit of killing off the Claudia/Jonas drama once and for all, that was my main reason for encouraging it.” Indeed it had, the two of them had never gotten along better than they did now.....aside from that time under the mistletoe a couple of years back, they would always have that, and it was Claudia’s first kiss to boot.

They were now at the entrance to the library, which was on the first floor and down the hall from the Dining Hall. Harry spent little time there, but was not totally unfamiliar with the joint. There weren’t that many kids in here this early in the term, though younger students were usually the ones who hung out and studied in the library, there were no arbitrary rules against talking or the like, Silencing Bubbles could always be put up, and the younger kids never got the prime studying spots in the Lounges.

“Get your wand out, and do what I do.”

“What you doing?”

“Just planting some seeds Marie, nothing heinous.”

So Harry spent the next 10 minutes going to random corners and aisles and waving his wand around, muttering as he did so. Marie was forced to ape him, and soon enough she got in the spirit of things.

Particularly after she heard that Harry was muttering ideas for his Christmas presents to Sophie, not spells, enchantments, or anything of the kind. They made a cursory attempt to do their work unnoticed, but Harry was one of the most recognizable faces in school, and coupled with the fact that he was rarely in here.....well one gets the idea. Harry had long ago told Alice Hoffman, the Librarian, that he would never hit her turf with a prank, and he had done this unsolicited. There was too much potential for an accident that way, and even Harry would have been hard pressed to replace all of those books, parchments, and scrolls. She, in turn, had assured him that that little

piece of information would stay between her and the Marauders. The two Marauders in her lair now passed her with a smile as they left, and she affected a look of worry, and openly spoke of summoning Heyman to investigate.

Harry and Marie got five meters out the door when she asked:

“There is no prank tonight, is there?”

“Sure there is, we just did it. It’s going to be the talk of breakfast, and the teachers will assure their fine students that just because they think the library might be hazardous, that doesn’t mean that their homework won’t be due. I’ll go back later tonight and sign our work, Prongs and B.C.” He was cackling at the thought of it. His non-terrorizing terrorism of Dan Wetzel back in May had whetted his appetite for this kind of thing.

“Did you do this with Drew?”

“No, we actually hit the Dining Hall that night.”

Realization hit her as she matched the dates in her head, and she started giggling.

“With the chairs that kept sliding around? That time?”

“That was a good one, it was Warrick’s idea though, not mine. Magical grease has so many uses.”

“So I’m getting a fake one.....?”

“Just trying to keep folk on their toes Marie, I only have 10 more months of this you know.”

“I surely do Harry, it’s the same for me too.”

They walked companionably back to the trunk, pleased with a job well done. Even if it was only a pair of acting jobs.

The next morning's Daily Prophet, true to Harry's prediction, ran a front page story, though not the top headline, on the scheduled Dark Force Defense League meeting on Hogwarts' Quidditch weekend. Speculation on who would or would not attend wasn't limited to Harry, it was noted that Fred and George, despite attending the first two Gryffindor Quidditch matches last year, had still not set foot inside the building since they left it so memorably. McCrae, who knew full well who Alicia Spinnet's landlord was and couldn't care less, put out some feelers to the twins, and then to Harry, about commenting for the record, or even as an anonymous source. They declined, though WWW did slightly expand its monthly print advertising buy for October, specifically to The Daily Prophet. which could be taken several different ways. And was. As much as Augustus McCrae disapproved of Harry, on general principles, he quite liked the twins, and knew that their business would give him advertising revenue for years to come. It could have contributed to why there had been no out and out hatchet jobs on Harry in recent months, just some innuendo here and there. Nothing so bold as to risk Harry marching into McCrae's office and challenging him to a duel, though Harry would occasionally daydream about that. The publisher assumed as much, he was a businessman, not a fighter, and was seriously considering a more overt peace gesture at some point.

Among those reading the story on the League meeting was one Tom Riddle. He and Pettigrew were in a strategy meeting when Nott brought the paper in. It's not like they could have an official subscription sent to The Orkneys.

Well they could, but that would raise a few too many questions. Besides, the place was under enough wards that owls had a hard time finding the location.

The bad man did a quick read of the article, and slid the paper over to Wormtail for his perusal. While the rat scanned it, Voldemort looked at Nott.

"Go get Bella and Parrish, now." Nott quickly left, and Pettigrew put the paper down. He didn't say anything at first, wanting to see if he could divine his Master's mood. He couldn't, not a rare occurrence,

and waited for the other two to be fetched. There was silence in the room as both pondered the potential here.

Bella and Parrish were there in less than a minute, Nott knew right where to find them it seemed, and no one dared tarry when the boss summoned them. They read the article, not understanding what it had to do with them. The bad man looked at Pettigrew first.

“Wormtail, your view.” Sensing that his Lord wanted some action, Pettigrew gave him just that.

“I see an opportunity here Master, an opportunity to put the Light side into open civil war and perhaps ride ourselves of a bothersome foe.”

“Continue.”

Pettigrew turned to their Potions Master, who had been gone a lot lately, he and Bella had been hunting for an assistant for him.

“Michael, how much Polyjuice could you have ready by the time this meeting is to take place?”

Parrish contemplated that for a moment, the stuff was brewing in a couple of different locations, both here and in Norway, where he kept his soon to be raided base. A base that was currently under surveillance by the tiny Norwegian Auror Command.

“Enough for perhaps 120 hours of changing, probably not much more than that.” Pettigrew smiled, that was better than expected.

“More than enough for what we need.” Need for what, Bella wanted to scream at him, but Voldemort beat her to the punch.

“What do you have in mind Wormtail?”

“Master, I propose sending Gibbon in with a small force, five men at most, and have them infiltrate the castle.” Bella immediately started scoffing.

“Oh, like it would be that easy sneaking six of our people in, when the castle is in lockdown more often than it’s not.”

Pettigrew badly wanted to say something snide in response, but he knew that his Master would let her curse him to her evil heart’s content, so he preached patience, if only to himself. He fixed her with a beady smile, and in his most patient voice:

“Hence the Polyjuice Bella. We have Frederick’s son provide us with hair samples from six random Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, and we sneak our men in with the crowd returning from the first Quidditch game.”

“And then what? Try to assassinate Potter?”

“Yes Bella, even if they miss, which they probably will, the kid will blame Dumbledore for the entire thing, and he might even try to curse him there right in front of everybody. That will bring the teachers in on Dumbledore’s side, most of the students on Potter’s, and the League and attending Aurors smack dab in the middle of the largest free-for-all in the history of Hogwarts. And that’s saying a lot.”

Everyone looked at Voldemort for his reaction, all of them assuming he had something similar in mind, if only because of Parrish’s presence. The Potions brewing mercenary was not what one could call a tactical genius, though he did know how to hold his wand properly. The bad man looked at his chief of staff, and with a tiny smile.

“A grandiose plan Wormtail. Why only six people?” Pettigrew had been busy with details in his mind since reading the article, and was just now working them out enough to say them out loud.

“Because a little déjà vu is acceptable Master, but mass quantities of it? We don’t want to tip anything off if the real kids were to happen to see them, or any of their friends or roommates. We have the six wait in the Forbidden Forest until the game is over, it’s the Gryffindor v. Ravenclaw game I’ve found out. Then we have them join the crowd

coming back. Once in the building, they wait until lunch is almost over, then they attack.”

“Why Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws? I understand why no Slytherins, but no Gryffindors as well?”

“Well Frederick, if we can sow some intra-House animosity, we should do so. A side benefit to all of this would be isolation of Gryffindors. Make them paranoid if we can, turn some tables.” Tables that Pettigrew himself had fostered during his Gryffindor time, before he saw ‘The Dark’

Voldemort nodded, he liked the plan in the broad strokes, just a few details that were unacceptable.

“I don’t like the idea of sacrificing Gibbon though, pick someone more expendable to lead the team.” Royal Gibbon was a long-term project of Voldemort’s, the only Death Eater with muggle military training. He had been selected for this 20 years earlier, upon his graduation from Hogwarts, after which he was sent by a still alive at the time Voldemort straight to the recruiting office for the British Army, the bad man feeling that if war was ever to come with the muggles, at least one Wizard should know how to use their weapons. No Auror had similar training, though Rufus probably wouldn’t have minded someone volunteering.. Gibbon had not reached the heights of the SAS, but during his 10 year tenure in Her Majesty’s Armed Forces, he had learned a trick or two, and had served in the Falkland Islands campaign. He was the leader of the shock troops, and Voldemort valued his individual skills, even if he did not have a place at the table, leadership-wise. Pettigrew rather liked him too, and while he did not necessarily view this mission as a suicide run, he was not about to argue the point.

“Flint then, he’ll know that Quidditch field and its environs better anyway.” That would be Marcus Flint, former Slytherin Quidditch Captain and the only person at Hogwarts to have ever beaten the crap out of Draco Malfoy, something that had happened twice during Draco’s First Year. Flint had gotten his Dark Mark the day after he graduated, and had somehow survived the carnage of the Malfoy trial,

Hogsmeade, and Riddle Manor. He was battle tested sure enough, and had a few werewolf and Auror scalps hanging from his belt.

“Flint will be fine, though design a piece of the plan to get him and the others out of there alive if possible.” Voldemort had finally grasped the concept of not throwing away his troops. His manpower totals were at a steady level compared to a year ago, but he had lost some prime magical talent. The Lestrage brothers alone were a huge blow, though it freed up Bella to now be his open companion.

“Yes Master.”

“Wormtail, put all of this in writing today, and I will peruse and make my final decision on the details. You have done very well.” With that, Voldemort got up and left the room, for parts unknown. Something he was doing a lot of recently.

Once everyone could breathe a little easier, Nott looked at Pettigrew with something akin to respect.

“You came up with all of that on five minutes notice?”

“The details yes, but the idea has been percolating for some time, since we heard some of the details of the Potter/Dumbledore meeting, where they almost came to blows.”

Well, not really. That was a fiction spread around by Lee Jordan, and whispered to various and sundry people in Knockturn Alley. Harry had given him the idea after saying how successful the disinformation campaign had been at Great Lakes.

“What about trying to take out Rufus as well as Potter? Six wands should be able to nail two people, even if they aren’t sitting together.”

“That’s a worthy goal Nott, but Potter is the key. Without him around to rally people we can destroy the Light side at our leisure, or force a one-sided negotiated peace on them, whichever our Master would prefer.” Pettigrew was sure it would be the latter, the less destruction the more people and property there would be to rule. Only

Hogsmeade had been an exception to this theory, though the bad man had never told the rat anything either way. But if anyone not sleeping with Voldemort knew the man's mind, it was Pettigrew. Now Bella, accepting that her Master/companion was going to do this plan, turned to Nott.

"Does it go without saying that your son had better pull his part of this plan off with flying colors?"

"When has he ever let any of us down? Once Malfoy was out of the picture, things got back under control there, and it's been nothing but to our benefit."

"True enough, but failure only needs to happen once. Look what happened to Snape."

Nott just waved her off, he had been as close to the Snape situation as anyone, and had been the only one to offer even a mild objection.

"Snape was so conflicted that even he didn't know what side he was on. He may have joined us in Dumbledore bashing whenever he got the chance, but he was undercover for a long, long time, his loyalties had to have been softening. You know as well as I do how persuasive Dumbledore can be. The only thing that kept Snape somewhat true is how much he hated Potter."

Bella did not necessarily disagree with any of that, but her voice softened quite a bit now, something unusual for her.

"True enough, but we need a victory here Frederick." And all four of them knew it, even Parrish, who wasn't the slightest bit responsible for any of their recent defeats. It wouldn't take but one more bad one for the troops to start muttering. And once muttering started in an organization like this one, talk of a coup was sure to follow, and the potential leaders of a coup were all in this room right now. And Voldemort knew it. Nott stood up as if to leave, a contemplative Bellatrix Black, as she was now referring to herself, made him more than a tad uncomfortable.

“I know Bella, but look at it this way, even if the plan fails, we’ve lost just six men. In terms of risk versus reward? We really can’t lose here, it’s a good plan.” And he meant that, even if Pettigrew was now the only thing standing between Nott becoming Voldemort’s chief, rational, advisor. If Nott could be said to like any of his colleagues, it was Pettigrew.

“I hope you’re right.”

“I do too.” He left, and Bella collected herself enough to debate the idea with Pettigrew for a little while longer, as Parrish stayed around too, hoping to pick up some knowledge about areas other than his own. They refined a few parts of it, and ultimately decided against anything like a diversionary attack, all focus was to go on the training of Flint and his five person squad.

Two days later Voldemort would approve the plan, with a few more small alterations. None that changed the fundamental nature of the operation though. Hogwarts would soon have a few new students.

Thursday, September 4

The Dining Hall

8:30 am

Dobby came around with a dark look on his face, and held out an envelope to Harry. It was from Hermione, and it’s brevity was matched only by its seriousness. Dobby would tell them later that she had had it waiting for him when he got there.

Dear Harry,

It’s all over school right the last 24 hours, about your return and all. The buzz all around is that Dumbledore is trying to show you up somehow, you and The Minister. Most people assume that you are going to come, and that there will some sort of incident provoked by someone, and the five of us are part of that ‘most’, at least that’s how I see it. The Slytherins are staying out of the gossip for the most part,

though you never know with them, they could be plotting something or taking instructions from Theo Nott's father and Voldemort. We were all sure that they would have done something to Draco by now and they haven't, though we all figure that they are either just waiting, or Professor Shepherd threatened them sufficiently.

I'm not going to try and talk you out of coming Harry, I agree that you have little choice, but please be careful. I don't just mean about Dumbledore and the faculty, but with yourself. I know how this is going to sound, but you once warned me against taking slights too personally, real or imagined. You were right then, and I believe I'm right to warn you about them now. Please don't let Dumbledore, or even McGonagall, goad you into doing anything that might have repercussions later on, or that The Minister can't fix.

Ron and Ginny are very happy that you'll get to see them play, I wonder if they're even thinking about the danger of it, while Neville just muttered under his breath that nothing good would come of this, and he refused to say anything more. Lord knows what Luna thinks, though she still smiles all the time. It will be good to see you again Harry, at least in that regard this is a good thing, we won't have to wait until Christmas at The Burrow to see you again. We all miss you.

Take care, and study hard, NEWT's are only a few short months away. Say hi to your American friends. Sorry, I should amend that to OUR American friends, they're lovely people and I look forward to seeing them at Christmas.

Love,

Hermione

Harry was unsure how to respond to this, on the one hand it was pure Hermione, concerned and loyal to the core. On the other hand, young Harry was getting awfully tired of people telling him not to butcher Dumbledore at the first sign of trouble. His own private worry was that this whole thing would get built up and built up until there was no choice but for something heinous to happen. Like Remus had told him, some prophecies were self fulfilling. He put it to the back of his mind and focused on his afternoon off. He actually did some

homework, starting work on his Muggle Studies term paper. Sophie had a regular study schedule for herself, and she had roped Harry into doing the same, something Hermione could not accomplish over a five year Hogwarts stretch. Harry idly wondered how she was going to get Ron to study for NEWT's, doing it for class was one thing.....but Harry assumed that either Ron had seen the light, his grades sure indicated that, or Hermione had threatened to 'put him on the couch'.

Saturday, September 13, 1997

Noon GMT

The Leaky Cauldron, Private Conference Area

Harry and the twins got to the meeting about two minutes before Dumbledore banged the proverbial gavel to get things started. Harry wanted no drama, no questions to Rufus about 'why the heck did you let this happen!?' Meaning he didn't want to give himself the temptation. There had been no direct communication between Harry and Rufus over the last week and a half, the younger man being very careful in accusing The Minister of anything, even being outmaneuvered by their mutual adversary.

The meeting was a relatively short one, at three hours, as the next one was only three weeks away, and there had been grumblings from some of the older members about the length of the meetings anyway. It's not that they had anything else to do really, but Dumbledore was not big on calling for bathroom breaks, and older men tend to have issues in that area. The meeting today dealt mainly with the security for the Hogwarts Quidditch games, and a few retread ideas about reopening Hogsmeade, which was still a ghost town without the ghosts. These were ideas that were brought up every time and shot down every time, but their proponents weren't giving up so easily.

It's worth noting that the professional Quidditch games of the BQL were not considered targets in any way, and never had more than two Auror crews guarding them at one time, which was the norm even when the bad man wasn't trying to take over the country. The reason for this was simple: A slim majority of the BQL owners were

already on the Death Eaters' side, even if only in sympathy only, with no attendant marks. If Voldemort was using money rather than magic as the sole weapon of the war, he would win, though not by a huge margin. Dumbledore was the richest person on the Light side, and Harry was somewhere in the top 15, though Gringotts would never tell the government who owned what. The goblins, as they so often repeated to an increasingly frustrated Rufus, were currently neutral in this conflict.

After the meeting, Travis motioned for Harry and the twins to come with him, quickly having them bypass a slow to get up Dumbledore. They followed him to another private room in the pub, this one much smaller, where Rufus joined the four of them a few minutes later. He sat down and eyed his young protégé with his customary friendly smile.

“Well Harry, I have to say that I’m surprised that you didn’t Howler me to death, it’s been 11 of the longest days of my life, waiting for them.” Harry just smiled back, he had never even been tempted.

“Well, you can’t win them all, and I’m assuming you tried.”

“I did, but I was at a disadvantage from the start, since the last two Quidditch doubleheaders also had League meetings attached to them, for security and convenience. I agreed with them at the time, not foreseeing this kind of complication, you having turned down the first League offer. Dumbledore claimed that precedent had been set, so he had gone ahead and scheduled other things for the rest of the month. I sarcastically asked if any of the prior commitments dealt with the running of his school, but he fobbed me off.” Rufus’ voice grew more exasperated with every word, he was not proud of being outmaneuvered like that and it showed.

“We’re agreed that we’re going to burn him down if he tries any tricks?” They sure as heck were.

“Yes Harry, we are agreed on that, though I’m sure it will come to nothing. This is nothing more than a cheap stunt by that old codger,

to show us that he still matters I suppose, it's really hard to fathom his mind at times."

"Gives me an excuse to see the games though, saves me the trouble of having to sneak in."

That gave Rufus an opening to ask something he had long been curious about, Travis too.

"Out of curiosity Harry, have you been back there since?"

"No Minister, not even this summer. Too many memories, even if the place was empty."

"I can only imagine. It's going to be fine Harry, nothing bad is going to happen." He felt that Harry needed some reassurance, or maybe he needed it himself, one never knew.

"I'm sure it will be sir. Oh yes, I almost forgot to ask, did Lucius ever regain consciousness?" Rufus and Travis looked at each other for a brief second, and The Minister seemed to look guilty.

"Yes he did, for a few moments anyway, last week. Travis and I went right over there, and to loosen things up, and amuse ourselves....." He hesitated, and the WWW three were on the edges of their chairs to hear the rest. Harry prompted him:

"And?"

Travis now started to laugh, as he finished the anecdote.

"Well Harry, The Minister here, for reasons passing understanding, decided to tell Lucius what you told him to say."

Harry's face went blank for a moment, then he remembered.

"I can't believe you actually told him that I slept with his wife." He hadn't shared that little story with Fred and George, who quite literally

fell out of their chairs from laughing so hard now. Once they calmed down enough to listen, Travis finished the story:

“Oh but he did Harry, and Lucius.....well he had a seizure of some kind, it turned out that he wasn't well enough for something that stressful. He's back in his coma now, they induced it this time, and I thought Dr. Andrews at St. Mungo's was going to hex Rufus to hell and back.” St. Mungo's was technically under Ministry supervision, Dr. Naveen Andrews was considered a department head and was in the line of succession to be Minister.....and that's probably the only thing that stopped him from both verbally and magically cursing Rufus.

“He'll be up and running in a week or so, and then we'll do some light questioning. It's a miracle he's still alive, after the loving ministrations of our werewolf friends.....and yes, my sense of humor. Don't be laughing so hard Harry, this is partly your fault.” Rufus was laughing too though.

“Well I guess I assumed that he would be healthy when you questioned him!”

“I'm not too old to learn lessons Harry, poor Lucius.” The sympathy for the man was palpable.

Well, not really.

“Oh yeah, Sophie wanted me to mention an idea to you.” He described her idea about the ride along, and to his surprise, Rufus didn't like the notion.

“I think you bringing a bodyguard in there would send entirely the wrong message Harry, both to your friends and your enemies, and that's what it would do if you brought Drew in there with you. It would look like you were afraid, and while I know you're not, we just cannot be having the perception that you might be, even a little. We were out maneuvered yes, but that's all. You three need to walk in there as if nothing is wrong or is going to happen, other than what you planned. And for Merlin's sake don't pull any pranks, that's just what the old codger would need to come down on your friends.” If only he had

known that the WWW three had talked about the idea of a Hogwarts pranking for about 15 seconds before coming to a similar conclusion.

“And Sophie? Would she be too big a target?”

“Not with all of you with her, I don’t see anyone there being that stupid, or willing to take the three of you on. Hell, I don’t have three Aurors willing to take the three of you on in any kind of fight, let alone the idea of three school kids doing it. No Harry, I think we should use the cards we have to play, no wildcards in this game.”

Harry noticed that Rufus didn’t technically say ‘no’, and he was sure Sophie would too if he was forced to replay this for her via pensieve.....but it might as well have been a no, and he wasn’t entirely unhappy with that result. His skinny rear was covered on a plan he had never quite taken too anyway, at least once he had pondered on it a bit.

They talked for a few more minutes about Harry’s first couple of weeks of school, and then the younger folk took off. Harry had lunch at the shop, and then flooed back home, arriving as usual, under the West stands at the Great Lakes Athletic Field. Fortunately the Quodpot trials had just concluded, and the field was empty. Harry had Winky go check for him anyway, just in case.

Harry arrived in plenty of time for Quidditch tryouts, Warrick having insisted on the first slot at noon, Michigan time. They had posted an flyer on the Cortez bulletin board, announcing that spots for all the positions would be open, though Harry, Reiko, Jane Abbott, and Warrick himself were guaranteed starting positions, the open positions being Chaser and Beater, with reserves wanted for Keeper and Seeker. The year before, Jane had had to be talked into trying out for Keeper, no one else had gone for it, and now she was an established starter.....and likely to be next year’s Captain, and for a long time after that, this being her Sophomore Year and her being the non-Senior with the most game experience. Sophomore Kim Cuthbert, Freshman Billy Amend, and Freshman Malcolm Reynolds were all guaranteed at least reserve spots, having been on the team last year, the first two having been starters before being nudged aside by Fred

and George. Reynolds was the lone reserve remaining from the first game way back in October, former reserve Jane Cobb having transferred to The Endeavor School in Australia over the summer. None of the three holdovers had been tempted by Quodpot, though all had been asked on the sly, despite Harry's very overt threats. They all liked the idea of winning another Quidditch Cup, and felt confident that Harry would deliver them another one. This attitude might not last longer than this year, but none of the Seniors were terribly concerned about that, this being their collective swansong. The Quodpot team had lost seven players, so any upperclassmen who were flying inclined went out for that sport, even though losing seven people from the far and away worst team in school could either be good or bad, depending on your point of view.

Marty, his roommate Mike McDermott, and three other Novices and Freshmen were the only new ones to come out for the team, meaning that there wouldn't be a full reserve squad even if all five of them were acceptable flyers. Marty was no problem of course, and Harry had taken him out the afternoon previous for some lessons. They were roughly the same size, though Marty had 10 pounds on him, so it was thought that Harry would know some tricks for someone like him. Harry's main advice had been this:

"The key thing Marty, is to feel what you're doing, don't over-think it. You have a top notch broom, and it will do what you want it to, as long as you're decisive about it. It's kind of like a horse, I've heard that a horse can smell your fear, the broom is the same way." This was one area where Marty was not so confident, at least in front of cousin, not present, or Harry. He knew that they were in the seventh years of playing Quidditch and he in his first, and he soaked up as much as he could from the future professional. Harry, for his own part, was reminded very much of the afternoon that Oliver Wood had taken him out to show him just what Quidditch was, just about six years and a thousand of his lifetimes ago. He could almost feel the Snitch in his hand from that first time, and wondering what the heck those different balls were. Oh Marty knew the game of course, and had been to more professional games than Harry had, the Brit having not been to any as of yet, so it was not exactly the same scenario. But Harry was still very nostalgic. He was getting older, and the last couple of weeks had finally slammed it home for him.

The two of them flew for an hour that night, and Harry thought the kid showed some real promise, informing Warrick as such. Marty was only going to be Beater material though, as there was no way he was going to wind up more than an inch or two shorter than Warrick, and probably a bit taller, as Warrick had only been 5'5" when he started Great Lakes. Marty was pretty thin right now, his mother having forced something of a diet on him during the summer, knowing all about the all-you-can-eat meals that Great Lakes offered. Grace Coyle knew the game and had seen it unfold. Poor Ozzie.

On this day though, Warrick had only an hour to evaluate them, and first sent them off on a race, from one set of hoops to the other, and back again. Not surprisingly, Marty won, but not by a lot over Novice Julie Ogden, who wasn't even five feet tall, but could fly very compactly. None of the others fell off their brooms, which was a good sign.

Great Lakes had a rudimentary flying class the first week for the Novices, basically one lesson where a teacher, this year it was Diego Chavez of Potions, made sure that all of them could in fact stay on their brooms. Otherwise it was up to their parents to teach them to fly, not the school, as it had no version of Madam Hooch. So muggleborn Novices rarely went out for Quidditch, any Novice period would have been laughed out of Quodpot trials. The muggleborns learned over the course of their first year, usually paying an upperclassman to do some quick instruction.

After the races, another was held after a five minute break, Warrick had McDermott, Marty, and Billy Amend take some turns with the Beater bat. Amend was the only one of them that had played Quidditch in a real game, and Warrick was really hoping not to have to use him in anything but Chaser, and his little cousin bailed him out by swinging the Beater bat really well. He needed some work on his timing and everything, but he proved that he could swing the bat and not fall off his broom while doing it, something not every prospective Beater could say. During the pickup games the previous summer even Harry had had a few problems with that, quickly corrected of course.

No one seemed interested in Keeper, until Warrick assigned Malcolm Reynolds to the task of being on the second team there. He had been the worst of the young players last year, but he was eager to get better. Warrick told him that he would get work at Chaser too, but they did need a backup, and he didn't want to do it.....Warrick had been backup Keeper for years now, and while he had never had to actually play in a game, no one had been happier when Jane Abbott had been conned into going out for the starting job last year. Warrick had played for three different Captains over the years, he knew how to massage things in his favor.

At the end of the practice session Warrick made the pro forma announcement that of course everyone had made the team, and that starting positions would be determined after a few practices. Later on he told Harry and company that Marty, Billy, and Kim Cuthbert would start if it had to be right now, with Harry being asked to start grooming Julie Ogden to replace him at Seeker. The first game would be the week after Harry's Hogwarts adventure, and Warrick strongly encouraged his roommate not to get arrested or killed between now and then, if he didn't mind. Harry acidly assured him that he would be on his best behavior, for the good of the team and all, not for any other reason. Warrick just smiled and thanked him.

Other team tryouts went smoothly that day, there were no all boy teams as there were the year before, and Sally Jenkins had made the controversial decision to sit out Quodpot this year, despite multiple entreaties from most of the Jefferson Quodpot team . Jonas never got the chance to 'recruit' her, as over the summer she had hooked up with a fellow Jefferson guy in her year and did not want to spend all of her time on the pitch or in the training room. Quidditch was her bread and butter, and she wanted to concentrate on that for the next two years before going into the draft. Harry heard that news and was already plotting strategy, though for some reason Murray had made the Cortez/Jefferson game the last one on the schedule, way ahead in June. One can be sure that she was not trying to draw out the tension or anything like that, or trying to set up a final match for the title. No, of course not.

The rest of the month went very smoothly for our players, there were intermittent pranks being done, but never by more than three of the

Marauders at a time, and certainly never on anything resembling a set schedule. Novices learned to watch the upperclassmen eat something at mealtimes before they did, and the use of the bathrooms in the Lounges soon got to an all-time low. The faculty remained non-pranked, and they just smiled benignly at the Marauders keeping everyone on their toes.

But the others could tell that Harry's heart wasn't really in it for the most part, he was looking forward to the Hogwarts visit, but at the same time he was dreading it. To Sophie, it was like a replay of Godric's Hollow, and the demons that were attached there. This was worse in a way, since with The Hollow he could only imagine what went on there, whereas with Hogwarts he had lived it fully, with the scars to prove it. He claimed that it was nothing of the sort, but he wasn't terribly convincing. Sophie waited until they were alone one night, getting ready for bed in the trunk.

"Come on Harry, it's okay to admit it. I know you're not scared to go in there, but there have to be a lot of memories there for you."

"There are Sophie, and no, I'm not scared."

"That castle was your home for a long time."

"Yes it was."

"But you're worried about what going back there might do to you."

"No, not really." Again, hardly convincing.

"Talk to me Harry."

He walked over to her and took both her hands in his.

"Sophie, you're reading too much into this. I'm not happy about going back there, not inside the castle anyway, but not because of any buried memories of snakes and quills and Dementors. I've faced those demons and dealt with them, and successfully I might add. I

killed the snake, I helped put Umbridge in prison, I learned to deal with the Dementors.”

“That’s what worries me Harry, that you’ve had to deal with all of that. Being here has lifted that burden off of you, it’s made you more free.”

“Yes it has, and a few hours inside that place isn’t going to change that. It’ll get easier the next time, and the time after that.” For there were two more Quidditch weekends to come, and there was not a doubt in his mind that this entire episode was to be repeated in March and June.

“I wish you had pressed for Drew to be able to come along.”

“No my love, Rufus was right on that one. It would have looked bad no matter how I tried to spin it. You guys will see Hogwarts eventually, we’ll try to swing something for graduation if we can, in 1999 certainly when Ginny and Luna graduate.”

“As long as you’re sure. You don’t sound sure, I hope you realize that.”

“I’m not 100 percent certain, if that’s what you’re wanting me to say.”

“Are you 99 percent sure? That would be good enough for me.”

Harry laughed, and proceeded to end this debate.

“How about 97.5 percent, I hope that will do.”

“I suppose so. This relationship is nothing but compromises I’m telling you.”

“Yet you love me anyway.

“Yes I do, very much.”

The lights went out, and Harry and Sophie took their minds off of Hogwarts for a little while. And then a little while some more.

Saturday, October 4, 1997

8:30 am GMT

Hogwarts Main Gate

The front gate was the arrival point for League members this day, at least those not already living or working at Hogwarts. Their departure point was The Leaky Cauldron, and they went in groups of two or three at a time, when they left depended on whether or not they wanted a Hogwarts breakfast. Harry and the twins did, and perhaps they also wanted to force an issue or two as soon as possible.

They appeared right in front of the main gate, right on the bare edge of the anti-portkey zone, and somehow landed on their feet. It was 2:30 am in Michigan, and Harry had already had three big bottles of Dr. Pepper in the last two hours, though the law of diminishing returns was slowly setting in. He had been in Britain for double that time, for his portkey paper trail. After he yawned for the 36th time in the last hour, Harry turned to Fred and George.

“Are we sure that this isn’t some terrible mistake?”

“Like we have a choice here.”

“Fred’s right Harry, nothing to do now but weather the storm and all that.” The twins weren’t any less wary than their partner was, but they knew that a prime part of their collective persona was confidence.

Harry just shook his head, and checked to see that they were still alone for the time being. They were, though that wouldn’t last too long.

“I love it when you two are philosophical. Dobby! Winky!” The elves popped in, Harry had not yet briefed them on their role in all of this, though they knew that Hogwarts was on the menu for the day. Dobby

looked as bothered as Harry had seen him in years, but he was there all the same.

“Yes Harry?”

“I want you two to be our eyes and ears in there, poke around discreetly and see if anything strange is going on.” Dobby and Winky looked at him a little funny, and he backtracked a little.

“Okay, stranger than usual for that place, okay?” That seemed to satisfy them.

“Yes Harry.”

“Yes Harry.”

They were off, and just as they were, Bill and Arthur arrived, having come from The Burrow.

“Well you three, are you ready for your grand return?”

Nope, all three thought, but refused to say, the last people they wanted to think they were nervous were these two blokes. Fred gave Harry and George a yank on their shirts and started through the gates.

“You bet Dad, we’ve been looking forward to this all month.”

“You’re certainly dressed for the occasion, though I’m sure Molly would be very flattered.”

That’s because all three were wearing Weasley sweaters and jeans, each one had an F, G, or H on them, depending on the wearer.

Oh yeah, Harry was wearing the G, George the F and Fred the H, though Harry did have his Cortez pin on, the one reminder to anyone who noticed that he was a student somewhere else. He had been all set just to wear his Great Lakes uniform of a coat and tie, but the twins thought of this ‘different’ approach, and Harry had readily agreed, liking the name switching very much.

The five of them walked up the path to the front doors, which today were being guarded by Kingsley Shacklebolt and his crew. Only verified members of the Dark Force Defense League were admitted to the building, any parents of Quidditch playing kids were directed right to the stands off in the near distance, the building was off limits to non-official visitors while the 'war' was on. This was a policy that Dumbledore routinely violated, but was somewhat careful about it.

The five of them got to the door, were waved inside by a blank faced looking Kingsley. No hesitation at the door though, people were now watching. Harry just half closed his eyes and followed Arthur, who was leading, to the Great Hall, where breakfast was now being served, the first game, Ravenclaw v. Gryffindor, was 90 minutes away.

It seemed that the arrival of the WWW three had been looked forward to, with eyes being peeled toward the door for the arrival. So there was a loud series of gasps when the four redheads and Harry strolled through.

That's about all the noise there was after a few seconds, as the prodigal son walked into a place he had not been in over 15 months. He didn't dare pause to take in the sights, much as he would have liked to. He kept repeating his 'act natural' mantra as he walked along the aisles, in the relative silence. Aside from the muttering, there was a lot of that. He saw Dumbledore and McGonagall at the faculty table way up front, the four House tables had been enlarged some to accommodate the League members who wanted to revisit the good old days and eat with their House.

Which Harry and the Weasleys did, Hermione and Ron had saved them all seats at the end of the table by prearrangement. Gryffindor was on the far left, with Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin going left to right. Harry plopped down between Ron and Neville, with Hermione on the other side of the tables and Ginny a little further down with Dean. He smiled bleary eyed at them all.

"Good morning, and I do mean morning." His eyes were a bit bloodshot now that they noticed.

Hermione was the first to snap out of it, and she smiled at him across the table.

“Good morning Harry, have a nice trip?”

“Not really. I got up at 12:30 in the bloody morning.....so I got an hour of sleep, and let me tell you that I don't like going to bed that early. How are you all doing?” He sure sounded crabby, though all of that was full of crap, he had crashed at WWW for three hours, and had taken a nap Friday afternoon as well, between Wandless and Charms. Hermione just gave him that look.

“You could have come over last night couldn't you?”

That stopped another rant about being tired, and Harry thought about it for a tick.

“I don't know, I never asked. Usually they start at noon, which means I have to get going at 3 am, which is better. Not much better, but better.”

Ron and Neville looked appalled at hearing that, but said nothing other than greetings for the first minutes. Fred took a small bag out of his pocket and tossed it to Ginny, who rarely sat directly with Ron and Hermione at meals unless there was something big going on.

“Your pay for September, don't spend it all in one place.” Fred was doing his best to keep his tone friendly, but he was a little on edge here, waiting for the shoe to drop. He decided that the best way to keep busy was to eat, so he filled his plate and dug in. The food wasn't as good as Dobby and Winky could provide, but it was free and plentiful, and kept him occupied. He looked over and saw that Harry was doing the same thing, pointedly ignoring Dumbledore, who appeared to be trying to catch his eye.

Harry did notice this, out of the corner of his eye, but he knew that any look he gave the old man wouldn't be a pleasant one, and he could feel the hope in the crowd of people for some kind of incident, if

only to liven things up. He spent his meal time catching up, as lots of Gryffindors came up to say hello, both to him and the twins. Quidditch was the main topic of the day, as most of them sensed that the less said about potential drama, the better.

“Are you ready Ron, Ginny? You have a streak to uphold you know.”

Ron looked as if he knew all about it, and was tired of hearing about it. There was a good reason for that feeling too:

“I know I know, Oliver Wood has now decided to become my pen pal, I get at least two owls a week about continuing the Gryffindor tradition, and tips on our position, and everything else under the bloody sun.”

Hermione could not resist a shot here, after all the Quidditch talk she had been forced to listen to recently.

“Ron darling, it was your idea to chat him up in the first place. You’ve heard Harry talk about how monomaniacal he is on the subject. What were you expecting?” She loved the look on his face that this generated, but it was short lived.

Also, usually Ron would have had no clue what monomaniacal meant, but in this case he had a pretty good idea.

“No it really was not my idea to chat him up Hermione, it was Warrick’s.” And a dawn of realization hit Ron like a thunderclap, it took Harry being there to bring it home for him. He turned to his friend, and in a fairly bemused, for Ron, tone of voice:

“He was pranking me, wasn’t he? He heard your Oliver stories and wanted to take the piss out of me by suggesting that I pick Oliver’s brain about Keeping and being Captain, knowing what would happen.”

Such a plan had honestly not occurred to Harry before, and everyone could see that on his face. Neville just started laughing.

“I think someone’s getting some hard questions when Harry gets back to Great Lakes this afternoon.”

“Well Ron, I don’t officially know anything about such a prank. Would you like me to find out? Maybe he just wanted some Captain tips of his own.” He started cackling at the incredulous look Ron was giving him, it was good to be back if only for this.

“Uh huh, sure.” Ron just assumed that Harry ran things for Cortez, with Warrick as his front man. That wasn’t the case, but Ron wouldn’t be talked out of that assumption anytime soon.

Harry was spared any more of this by Ron rising and indicating to his team that it was time to go. Harry reached out his hand to his former best mate.

“Good luck Ron, knock them dead.” Not literally, this was only Ravenclaw they were playing today.

“Thanks mate, I’m glad that you’ll be there to watch.” And he was, July had taken care of a lot of issues for Ron, he was more at peace with Harry’s fame and money than he had been in years.

“Me too mate, me too.”

Ginny was on his side of the table as well, and gave Harry and her brothers brief hugs as she walked by, kissing her father on the cheek. Arthur looked at his children with a lot of pride.

“Get that Snitch Ginny, the entire Weasley family honor is depending on you.” He said this with a light hearted tone and a big smile at the second Seeker in the family, or third, depending on how one counts Harry.

“I will Daddy, I love you.” She left, hurrying after her brother out the doors.

One more person stopped at the Gryffindor table to say hello before going to get ready to play in the game.

Draco Malfoy.

“Hello Harry, Fred, George. Welcome back.”

His tone of voice was friendly, the smile on his face seemingly genuine, and all of this put the twins at a loss. Harry wasn't at that point though, and chose to play to the crowd a little, as Dumbledore and Remus in particular were watching this very closely.

“Well if it isn't the new Ravenclaw Seeker? If you weren't playing against family I might even wish you luck out there.” Draco was equal to the task.

“Wish for a good clean game then, with your baby sister and I diving for the Snitch.”

“That I will, I want to be entertained as much as the next guy. Be careful out there.” Harry then reached out his hand, and Draco shook it. Half the room looked up at the fake sky to see if frogs were raining down. They weren't, and Draco leaned down as he held the handshake a couple of seconds longer.

“Nice Potter, very nice, everyone will be speculating now.”

“Just kick Slytherin's ass the next time I'm here okay?”

“Anything for my old enemy.”

He let go of the handshake and walked off, to the collective amusement of Harry and the remaining Hollow gang, and the astonishment of most everyone else. Except Dumbledore, he was smiling, as if he had wanted that very thing to happen. It's a good thing Harry didn't noticed this right away, or he might have tried to walk back the Draco business with a nice Stunner to the backside.

Just then Rufus came by with some notes and instructions for Harry and the Weasleys, he had been meeting with his godson Charles Shepherd during breakfast, getting the lowdown on certain things related to Dumbledore. Not that Dumbledore knew this mind you, he was still sadly unaware of the connection of his Potions Master and The Minister.

“Well men, good day for Quidditch. You five will be working the second game of course, on patrol and all that. The first game just enjoy yourselves watching Ron and Ginny, but make sure you keep your wands ready, just in case.”

Hermione couldn't resist:

“In case of what sir?”

Rufus just smiled at her, and threw out a zinger.

“In case someone tries to jinx a broom and you need to light someone on fire Hermione.” She took this in, turned to Harry and asked mock sweetly:

“Been sharing some stories have we Harry?”

“It's iconic Hermione, how could I not?”

“You just wait.”

“Oh everyone knows my stories already. Aren't I The Boy Who Lived? I almost walked into a fence the first day in Michigan when Sophie said that I was in their history books.”

Hermione nodded as if she could believe that very thing.

“I'm sure. Come along now League members, let's get to the game. You can see your old dorm room later Harry.” What was there to see, Harry wondered, it was just a dorm room. In fact Hermione was assuming that a pensieve memory of this entire day would be shown to the gang back at Great Lakes, and she just figured that they would

all want to see where Harry had lived for five school years. Smart woman that.

Everyone got up and followed her out, a few other Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs stopping to shake hands. Harry exchanged a smile and a handshake with Michael Corner, his replacement as the object of Cho Chang's affections. Though there was a replacement for Corner as well, he had ironically been the one to dump her, rather than the other way round, a month back, she had dropped enough hints about a wandering eye that he wasn't willing to deal with it anymore. Cho was now the reserve Seeker for The Chudley Cannons, and Ron had hesitantly reminded Harry after hearing the news, that his favorite team was his favorite team, identity of reserve Seeker be damned. Harry had solemnly assured Ron, this had happened in early July, that they were still friends even with all that.

They made a slow walk along the grounds to the Quidditch Pitch, as everyone caught up on things, with details too cumbersome for letters. Hermione was still waffling about what to do after Hogwarts. Since Ron wasn't around, she felt it was safe enough to ask Harry, in a whisper, to get her copies of the college applications that the gang would be filling out. Actually they had set aside the next day to do it, 10 applications per person would involve a lot of writer's cramp.

"Are you sure?"

"It's only filling out forms Harry, you can't have too many contingency plans can you?"

"No you cannot, though I'm struggling to see you at The University of Hawaii." Still the odds on favorite.

"I like the beach as much as the next girl Harry."

"And just when was the last time you were at the beach?" Harry had difficulty with the concept of Hermione in a bikini, though he did find her more attractive than he used to.

Hermione thought hard on that for a few ticks.

“Well it’s been a while, maybe three years or so.” That was a long time, or so Harry thought. He planned to spend every weekend he could at Isla de Marauder, once he had graduated and all and had to resist saying something about that here, as Hermione did not know of the island.....miraculously no one had let it slip at The Hollow.

They got to the stands in short order and everyone sat in the Gryffindor section of course, even Luna, who thankfully did not have her lion hat on. Indeed she wasn’t wearing the butterbeer cap necklace either, and Harry was worriedly wondering whether she was going normal on them. Drew would not like the sound of this, he may be seriously in like with Marie, but he still had a quiet torch for Luna.

“Where’s your lion hat Luna?”

“Oh it blew off at last year’s Slytherin game and I couldn’t find it anywhere. It’s okay, I’ll wait until you pick a professional team to play for and get one that fits that.”

A very flattered Harry had a big smile on his face.

“Thank you, I think you’ll like wearing something for the Death Valley Devil Dogs.” That was the team nearest Hawaii, and the non-sports fan Hermione just looked appalled, especially when Luna started giggling.

“You’ll have your pick of any team in the world and you’re going to go to one called the Devil Dogs?”

“Why should I care? The money spends the same you know. Is it any hokier than the Cannons?” Hermione was so not going there, as Winky appeared next to them, with snacks and things that Harry had asked her to prepare. The next stop for the elves was to wander around the pitch, on the outside of course, just making sure.

A Hufflepuff Fourth Year named Mike Doyle had been announcing the games the last two years, he had a pretty deep voice for a 14 year old kid, but was very popular with the crowd. He was not the

insult artist that Lee Jordan had been though, and McGonagall had never had to admonish him. He announced the teams, Ginny getting the biggest cheer for the Gryffindors, with Draco surprisingly getting the loudest cheers among the Ravenclaw players. Apparently a few months of model behavior had really turned around his image.

Well sort of, the entire Slytherin contingent booed the living crap out of him for as long as they could get away with it. It elicited a broad smile though, and Draco, ever the showman, waved to them cheerfully. He was not the Captain, his fellow Seventh Year Anthony Goldstein had that honor, and after a quick conference between him, Ron, and Madam Hooch, play was begun.

“The Quaffle is up, and Natalie McDonald has it for Gryffindor!”

The initial Chaser play was a little sloppy for both teams, as each of them only had one veteran Chaser returning. Ron and Stephen Cornfoot, the Ravenclaw Keeper, were not seriously challenged in the first quarter hour, as defense appeared to be way ahead of offense. Harry had Dobby go get his omnioculars, and he spent a lot of the early action watching Ginny and Draco, who were not flying too closely together, nor were they taunting each other as in years past. It took 30 minutes of action for the Snitch to appear, and it was so close to Ron, that if the rules had permitted it, he could have grabbed it and ended the game right there. He couldn't though, and had to content himself with the shutout that he was pitching, all the while screaming instructions to his Chasers and Beaters. Orla Quirke was the veteran Chaser for the Ravenclaws, but her teammates were such bad passers that she rarely got in a good shooting position before Natalie McDonald could impede her.

Natalie, on the other hand, didn't bother with being passed to. She pulled a Sally Jenkins and just did her own thing, and Cornfoot was weak enough that she got away with it for awhile, racking up four goals in that first half hour. This wasn't much, but neither team looked especially sharp. Harry couldn't help comparing the flyers with his own squad for Cortez, and felt that his team actually didn't measure up too badly. Warrick would have been the best, and by far the biggest, Beater out there, and Reiko could probably fly with any Chaser other than Natalie and maybe Orla. He knew, immodestly

maybe, that Ginny couldn't hang with him at Seeker either. Maybe this Dumbledore challenge match could happen after all, Harry was musing to himself after Ron all but crashed into poor little Orla Quirke and stole the Quaffle from her, scaring her shitless in the bargain.....Ron wasn't a small man, the tallest person on the pitch in actuality. After making sure that Orla was okay, Harry returned to his idle musing, some of which he was muttering out loud. It could be Cortez v. Gryffindor, not an all-star game, which would even the odds some, as he knew that a great Seeker on a lesser team was better than a decent Seeker on a good team. If it came to it he could even play Chaser with Reiko, Julie could be trained up in time.....

"Oh would you shut up about that Junior, you know perfectly well that Murray would have to resign first for that to even have a prayer of happening." That was George, sitting on his right. Apparently Harry's muttering had been a bit loud.

"She might owe me one eventually you know. Lycans might invade the school again or something like that." The person to his left didn't like the way this was heading either.

"Please don't joke about that Harry, people were killed."

"I know Hermione, I knew all three of them remember?" Barely, he didn't say, he had known Chappelle best and that wasn't saying much.

"I'm sure you did, but it's still a bad idea. You know how it kills me to agree with a twin on much of anything, but he's right. Save your chits, when you get them, for other things."

"Well Junior, I hate admit that she's right on the money, but she is. I'm going to go have myself examined at St. Mungos after the second game and our hasty exit." Natalie scored another goal as he said this, and the score was now 50-0. Ron was getting more aggressive in goal, coming out further and further in an attempt to become part of the offense.

“Okay, okay, I’ll give it up for the time being. Just wait until she owes me something though, neither of you two will be there to talk me out of it.”

That’ll change after I have a chat with Sophie, thought George. He didn’t say this, he just patted Harry on the shoulder.

“I knew you would listen to reason, eventually.”

Before Harry could respond, the Snitch decided that it was time that the game be decided, and appeared right in front of Ron again for some strange reason. It hovered there for a few seconds as a now quite agitated Gryffindor Keeper screamed for his sister to get her ass over there. Draco was closer though, and he was the better flyer as he rocketed toward the Snitch.

Ginny ate up the ground as best she could, while Ron did his best to get in his old tormentor’s way, to at least slow him down.....but his screaming had perhaps done more harm than good, though Draco might have seen the Snitch first anyway.

Ron’s delaying tactics didn’t quite work though, as Draco’s brand new Firebolt quickly ate up the ground, he hadn’t really done much with it up to this point. Ginny put all she had into it, but even with Ron nearly ramming into Draco, she was 10 meters away when her opponent grabbed the Snitch behind the Gryffindor hoops. Natalie had scored again while this was going on, so the final score was 150-60 for Ravenclaw, the second win in a row in this series for the Ravensclaws, who had last won the Quidditch Cup in 1992, when Harry had been in the Hospital Wing after his fight with Quirrel. They were now the odds on favorites to win again, as Hufflepuff and Slytherin had hemorrhaged experienced players from the year before and were not expected to contend for the Cup.

Ginny looked crushed as the Ravenclaw team flew over to their Seeker, who of the four Seekers playing today was far and away the leader in Snitches caught over his now six year career. This one was pretty sweet for Draco though, and for the first time the majority of the crowd was cheering him after such a catch, even the Gryffindors

were politely applauding him. Ron flew over to his sister and presumably told her the truth: that it was all a matter of positioning, and she was in the wrong place at the wrong time against a more experienced Seeker with a faster broom. That's what Harry would have told her if he was Captain, and indeed the crowd was treated to the rare spectacle of Ron and Ginny hugging. It didn't last long, but it was still a sight to see.

The Gryffindor section was giving them all a standing ovation, as Mike Doyle proclaimed Ron as the player of the game for pitching his shutout. Small consolation for Ron, but he was inwardly very pleased that he had played so well, even against the hapless Ravenclaw Chasers. There were scouts from every team in the BQL at the games today, and Ron was leaping up the draft boards for a few of them. Harry and company went down to the pitch to commiserate with their friends, and to walk out with them. Ginny was a tough enough woman not to be in tears at the moment, this was not the first Snitch she had ever lost, but she was very loudly blaming herself for the defeat.

Meanwhile, there had been events happening in the Forbidden Forest:

Seven people were waiting for the first game to end, and were quite grateful for Mike Doyle's very clear voice, which guided them very nicely indeed. There were seven of them because one of the minor changes to the plan was that Royal Gibbon was to send Flint and his boys on their way to the castle. Voldemort figured that someone needed to coordinate things, though Gibbon was under strict instructions not to join them at the castle, however much he might want to.

He didn't really, though he didn't tell his superiors this information. Gibbon in fact thought that this plan was begging for trouble at best, and an invitation to disaster at worst. All it would do was stir up things at Hogwarts that didn't need to be stirred up, and it's not like Potter could be killed anyway, at least not by anyone besides Voldemort himself.....who should have been the one doing this idiocy, again, not that Gibbon was willing to say any of this out loud. He checked his watch, and he assumed that the game was winding down. There

were within sight of the main exit of the pitch, and could see when people would be leaving.

“Flint, are you ready?”

Flint, who was now disguised as a Fifth Year Ravenclaw named Hopper Matthews, nodded.

“I am, we will not fail our Master. Potter will be dead by the time dessert is served.” Flint sounded so sure of this that it raised Gibbon’s hopes a little. It was one thing to be overly confident in front of their Master.....

Just then he heard Doyle announce that the Snitch was being chased, and Flint in particular was listening closely, Death Eater or not he was still a Quidditch fan, and had taught Draco a lot about the game and about flying. He even smiled when his one time teammate got the Snitch. But he was not smiling for long though, as he put his game face, so to speak, on.

The crowd started to trickle out of the pitch, mostly Slytherins and Hufflepuffs that had no direct truck in the game. Three of the assault force were disguised as Hufflepuffs, and Flint directed them to join the crowd, under Disillusionment Charms until they reached the castle. They were then to meet outside the library for final deployment. Soon thereafter the Ravenclaw students left the pitch, coming on the heels of the vanquished Gryffindors. Flint and the remaining three strolled out to meet their ‘Housemates’, leaving Gibbon behind. He had been instructed to remain there, to await any of Flint’s team that might escape, and to check for chaos if none did. There was only one, very slight, problem.

He had visitors.

Unbeknownst to them, the seven Death Eaters had been watched by Bane and a dozen of his Centaurs this entire time, and they had heard everything that was said after the first couple of minutes. And the Death Eaters had been in place since 9:30 am, just waiting, that was a lot of talking. After the second Death Eater group left, the ever

cautious Bane decided to act, though he waited until all of the children were out of sight. He quietly drew his bow back:

THWANG!

At 10 meters away he could hardly miss, and planted the small hunting arrow square in the middle of Gibbon's right shoulder blade, the Wizard had turned quickly as he had heard an unrelated noise in the forest. Gibbon went down quickly with the force of the shot, dropping his wand as the arrow sunk deep inside him. Bane followed up by quickly advancing and putting another shot into Gibbon's left shoulder, sending him down for the count.

"Don't move a muscle Wizard, or the next arrow will go somewhere more delicate." That could taken a few different ways, and Gibbon chose to stay down and not be perforated anymore. The Centaur hadn't said that he couldn't speak though:

"What do you want with me?"

Bane didn't answer him, instead he looked to the sky, and seemed to find his answer there.

"What are you planning to do to Harry Potter?"

Gibbon had no plans to answer that question honestly, though he was disquieted about the subject..

"I don't know what you're talking about."

At least until another arrow went directly into his left thigh, and from a distance this time of two meters. There was more arrow on the bottom than on the top and he was feeling it big time.

"What are you planning to do to Harry Potter? You can guess where the next arrow will go."

Yes he could, but Gibbon was a tough man, and figured that he could withstand a little more. This was his first Centaur encounter, and he

knew nothing about them other than that they were excellent bowmen. Duh.

“We just want to give him a message is all. No students in there are going to be harmed by what we’re doing.” Which was technically true, at least if Flint and his folk stuck to the plan.

“Interesting Wizard, I could have sworn I heard you talking about assassinating him.”

“You heard wrong, I swear.”

Bane moved forward, the rest of his men now surrounded Gibbon, and had any Hogwarts folk been at the pitch they would have seen this. He got right next to Gibbon and leaned one hoof, somewhat lightly, on top of Gibbon’s right hand.

“I do not hear things incorrectly Wizard.” He eased a little more weight onto Gibbon’s wand hand, and the former paratrooper started to moan a little in pain.

“You’re going to kill me anyway, why should I tell you anything!”

“Because not all death is instantaneous, Royal Gibbon. That said, tell me what I want to know and you will not die here today.” A most ambiguous promise, but the Death Eater did not think that far ahead, concentrating on the fact that this Centaur somehow knew his name.

Gibbon had no wish to die period, and while he worshipped Voldemort as much as the next Death Eater, being willing to kill for someone is not the same as being willing to die for him. He quickly explained the plot to Bane, who had not stopped crushing his hand all the while, though he had mercifully not increased the pressure at all.

“And that’s the truth, I swear to God.” Unlike most Death Eaters, Gibbon was Christian and this oath actually meant something to him.

“I believe you.” Bane then pulled off Gibbon’s hand and proceeded to kick him in head, hard enough to render him unconscious, but not so hard as to render any brain damage. He turned to Magorian.

“We need to warn the Potter boy about this.”

“You have always advocated staying out of Wizard affairs.”

“This is different, Potter must be allowed to reach his destiny and fight the evil Wizard as the heavens dictate. It has fallen to us to assist him, in a limited way. Prosna!”

Prosna was third in command, and had been the traitor Firenze’s closest friend before the schism.

“Yes Bane?”

“You and I will go to the school and inform them of this matter, we cannot trust the Dumbledore Wizard to handle this correctly on his own volition.” Something of a pattern with that wasn’t there.

“I agree, we must go at once.”

“Magorian, take the prisoner back to camp, we will deal with him later. Look to the sky until we get back though, I may need to send you a message.” This was the first thing in this entire episode that Magorian had approved of, but Bane was their leader, and he had to trust that he knew what he was doing.

“Of course.”

“Good. Let us hurry Pronsa, I do not have a good feeling about this.” He started off toward the school, with Prosna close behind him.

Meanwhile, in Hogwarts:

Lunch was going along smoothly, with Harry doing his best to give Ginny a pep talk. She tried to be upbeat about it, and it sure helped

that Draco was not rubbing it in from the Ravenclaw table. He even stopped by to pat her on the shoulder, of all the DOM' s, she was the one he liked best.

“When's your first game Potter?”

“Next Saturday, a replay of the Shawnee massacre.”

Fred and George immediately started in on that subject, whenever they had wanted to take the piss out of Claudia they brought up that game and the fact that her Housemates quit on poor Keeper Tim Spooneybarger.....ok, they brought it up a lot of other times as well. Harry let them go on for a minute this time though, much to Draco's amusement.

“Okay, okay, jeez. Yes, we anticipate a handy victory. Then we shut down until April, it's too cold to fly over there for a few months.” Draco of course would never get to see 'over there', as long as the wards were up.

“Then I don't need to say good luck do I? Anyway, good luck.” He went over to his seat between Lisa Turpin and Anthony Goldstein. Hermione looked about ready to grill Harry about something, when Dobby appeared at his side.

“Harry, you need to come with me for a moment.” This rarely ever happened, so Harry didn't hesitate. He calmly got out of his seat and followed Dobby over to the corner, where Travis Biller was waiting for him.

“What's going Travis?” But it was Dobby who spoke.

“I was patrolling the hallways Harry and Travis, when I saw a group of six students grouped together near the library. They were wearing Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw insignias on their robes.”

Harry and Travis looked at each other as Dobby paused for breath, both wanting to ask what the big deal was. But they let him tell his story his way.

“The reason I am bringing this to your attention is: the ages of the students were all over the place, and I got close enough to see that some of them, if not all of them, had hip flasks attached to their belts.” Okay, that was why. Travis did not like the sound of this at all.

“Did they notice you were there Dobby?”

“No Mr. Travis, I always make myself unseen when I am in this castle, unless I am in front of Harry’s friends.” And yes he did, Dobby hated Hogwarts, and no one was looking forward to Ginny and Luna graduating more than he was, so he would not have to come back here.

“Where are they now Dobby?”

“They appeared to be waiting for lunch to wind down before they came inside here Harry.”

Not for long though, as the six disguised Death Eaters had not tarried long after Dobby had left them. They were now entering the Great Hall, and tried to seem as casual as they could. The six of them were still wearing their cloaks, with half them having their hoods up and having of them not, so as to avoid the perception that they were together.

And it was working too, as by chance none of the six that they were impersonating looked up and saw their doppelgangers. They ambled somewhat slowly to the far end of the tables, where Theo Nott had told his father that the DOM’s usually sat, which meant that Harry would be sitting there. He wasn’t now though, and Hopper Matthews/Marcus Flint quickly noticed this. He soon spotted Harry and Travis in the corner, and they seemed to be giving instructions to a house elf. Or at least that’s what it appeared to be to anyone who didn’t know about Dobby, and Harry had not exactly advertised the versatility of his staff to anyone here at Hogwarts beyond the DOM’s.

Flint knew that the others would be following his lead, so he kept going up the line, which was now starting to attract a little bit of

attention as he and his comrades were passing up empty seats, and not even looking at them in the process. No one had a chance to act on this though, as the Death Eaters all came within sight of Harry. Flint slipped his wand into his hand, his troops doing the same upon seeing this, they were watching their leader very closely. He raised his wand very deliberately, all too aware that he would only have one shot at this, if that.

His wand was halfway up to the ready position when all hell broke loose at the entrance.

Flashback to a minute ago, at the front doors to Hogwarts.

Kingsley Shacklebolt and his crew were still on guard duty at the front entrance, Travis' sop to Dumbledore by making it someone from his 'precious Order', as Travis put it to the old man. The Head Auror was growing more and more bold with Dumbledore, and no longer even tried to be respectful. The meeting in The Burrow had really bothered him apparently, though Dumbledore continued to be the soul of politeness, which only irritated Biller that much more. One could suppose that Dumbledore was the master of passive-aggressiveness if nothing else.

Kingsley was watching the grounds when he saw Bane and Prosna approaching. He pulled out a pair of omnioculars and was relieved to note that the two did not have their bows at the ready, but this still bothered him. Centaurs can move very quickly at top speed, so it was only seconds before they got there. No wands were leveled at them, but all three magicals had them out.

"We need to see Harry Potter, right now." That was not totally unexpected, or at least the Auror knew it probably was not a coincidence.

"Who are you? And what makes you think you can just waltz in here and talk to Harry?"

Bane did not roll his eyes, but this merely confirmed to him why he hated Wizards, always with the useless questions at the worst times.

“There is a threat inside against him, Voldemort has slipped men inside to try and kill him. They must be stopped.” It was four men and two women, if one wants to be precise.

Kingsley knew that he should believe this, one didn't encounter Centaurs out and about like this every day, but he hesitated just a bit too long for Bane's taste.

So Bane knocked him down, and he and a fast acting Prosna swiped the other two magicals aside in short order, though not doing any permanent damage to them. Bane had never been inside the castle before, but his hearing was good enough that he could tell where everyone was, so he raced through the hallways until he got to the Great Hall. The doors were half closed, deliberately by the Death Eaters, so Bane used his hooves to crash them open, loudly.

“Harry Potter!”

Not all eyes turned to Bane in the doorway, but most did. Flint was equal to the task though, and after a half second look to see what the noise was, attempted to finish the job. He whipped his wand up the rest of the way and yelled out:

AVADA KEDAVRA!

His compatriots did the same, leveling Killing Curses at where Harry had been before Bane distracted them.

AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!

One thing though: Harry wasn't there anymore.

Dobby had been the key, he had made Harry start looking around, and once Harry knew that he had to look for something suspicious, Flint and his crew were easy to spot. Bane surely helped matters though, and made the aim of Flint and company a bit off.

The Killing Curses exploded into the East wall, destroying most of it as Harry and Travis had rolled to either side of the damage path. They, along with the twins and what seemed like half the Dark Force Defense League all leveled their own wands:

STUPEFY!

Times 30.

Not a one of them used Avada Kedavra thank goodness, as Aurors were trained to stun first, so that the one stunned could be questioned. The ones with time to think, Harry and Travis, just flat out did not like the idea of using a Killing Curse in front of 300 school kids, though neither had said this out loud.

Flint and company were each hit by at least a pair of Stunners as the place went into bedlam.....of course no one knew it was Flint, he and his folk had reloaded on the Polyjuice five minutes ago. They dropped like the proverbial rocks, and Rufus immediately took command of the situation, putting his wand at his throat.

“QUIET! SHUT THE BLOODY HELL UP NOW!”

This was as angry as anyone had ever seen Rufus, and his tone of voice accomplished what words alone might not have, as things came down to a murmur. He had been sitting next to his godson at the faculty table, and the look on his face quailed most of them.

“No one is to leave this room! I want at least three Aurors at every door right now! Not one of you is to leave your place without direct permission from Travis Biller, Amelia Bones, or myself. Is that bloody clear!?” It sure seemed to be, as no one wanted any attention on themselves right about now. Even Lance LeGault, sitting at the Slytherin table and one who normally despised Rufus, was looking at him with a mixture of fear and respect. Dumbledore just stayed in his chair, paralyzed by what might have been, how close the child of the Prophecy had come to being murdered right in front of him. He would not utter a word for quite some time, ignoring muttered questions from McGonagall on his left and Flitwick on his right.

The only one to disregard Rufus' order was Harry, to the surprise of no one. He wasn't sitting down to begin with of course, and he walked over to Flint and yanked his head up off the ground, vaguely recognizing the face. He noticed the Ravenclaw crest on the robes and half dragged the body over to that House's table, addressing them.

"Who is this?"

There was a loud gasp, or rather a series of them, as one boy involuntarily stood up.

"That's me." It was Hopper Matthews himself, who was having the biggest case of déjà vu in Hogwarts history. Fortunately Rufus didn't curse him where he stood for violating his order.

Harry checked Flint's hip for a flask, found one, and ripped it off, tossing it over to The Minister. Rufus poured some on the table in front of him, and Shepherd immediately recognized the liquid.

"Polyjuice."

The other five bodies were immediately searched by a furious Travis and some of his people, and five identical flasks were found. Rufus looked at the horrified look on Hopper's face and immediately cottoned on to the fact that this kid was clueless about how this imposter had gotten into the building. In a gentle voice he said.

"Sit down lad." This had the effect of somewhat calming Hopper, though not for long as five more heads were raised off the ground, they had all fallen face down for some reason, and five more gasps as three Hufflepuffs and two more Ravenclaws identified themselves.

Meanwhile Theo Nott was having chest pains right about now, and they were growing in strength with every passing moment. He had naturally assumed that the six Death Eaters would be killed, not stunned, whether they got Potter or not. Theo was the leader of the Dark Slytherins in school, and what's more everyone knew it, so he

knew that he would be getting some hard questions no matter how much had been Obliviated from Flint's memory. The discovery of the Polyjuice was evidence of that, why that bloody idiot Flint couldn't have disposed of the flasks was beyond his comprehension.

Theo acted somewhat nonchalantly though, as he could see that more than a few teachers were looking straight at him. He knew that to attempt an escape right now would be idiotic, so he just sat there with a concerned look on his face and bided his time.

Rufus came down from the head tables, after a look at Dumbledore that clearly communicated 'don't move a centimeter you incompetent gasbag'. He joined Harry and Travis, who were ransacking the bodies for any possible intelligence. Rufus looked at his Head Auror.

"Well?"

"They're clean sir, nothing on them, not even some money." The two of them had done everything short of a cavity search, though that would be done by Auror personnel later on.

"So no portkeys to get home eh? Well we'll extract that knowledge from them as soon as we know who they are. Are you two okay?" Travis nodded that he was fine and fiddle, while Harry was bleeding a touch from a couple of nicks.

"I'm fine Minister, just some cuts from the wall." Harry had taken a little damage from the 'shrapnel', but the nearest Killing Curse had missed him by over a foot. Sophie was not going to like this one bit.

"What are we going to do Rufus?"

"We're going to wait here until these people turn back to themselves Travis. No one is going to leave here, they had inside help and we're going to find out who."

"One of the kids? Or one of the teachers?" Rufus didn't answer that immediately, as all three pondered Travis' question. After a few moments:

“I’m leaning toward one of the kids, Charles would never turn on me, and Sinistra is barely a Slytherin. None of the others fit the profile, and I did a thorough background check on all of them last Fall. No, it was one of the students who supplied these people with the hairs, the sampling is too random to indicate otherwise. Sanford!”

Sanford Jenkins and his crew were near the faculty door, and he came over.

“Take two crews and round up any stray students that might be wandering around. Do it quickly, and make sure you get everyone.”

“Right away boss.” He moved off, and soon six Aurors had left the room.

Bane had just been standing in the doorway with Prosna while all of this occurred, just waiting. Now Rufus turned his attention to the Centaurs and waved them over.

“I’m Rufus Scrimgeour.” He reached out his hand and Bane reluctantly took it.

“I am called Bane, this is Prosna.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m assuming that you have something to tell us.”

“We captured a Death Eater in the forest, and saw these six go off to the castle here. It would seem as though we arrived just in time.”

“Yes, your distraction probably saved some lives.....wait a second, there is a seventh Death Eater?” This just kept getting worse and worse.

“Yes, his name is Royal Gibbon, we have him in our custody.” Biller looked almost gleeful, this was a major capture. He quickly asked Bane:

“He admitted to this plan?”

“Yes, he made a full confession.”

Centaurs did not use drugs for questioning purposes, and all four Wizards, Bones had now joined them, knew that some torture had been involved. Not that they minded really.

“Did he name any of these people?”

“Yes, the leader is called Marcus Flint, though I do not know which one of these bodies he is.”

Rufus knew that they would find out within the hour, surely Harry at least would know which one Flint was once the Polyjuice wore off, he himself knew the name and nothing else. He looked around the room for a moment, everyone was still in their places thank goodness, with Dumbledore just sitting in his spot, motionless. The Minister knew that there was a reckoning coming with that man, and soon. But first things first.

“Under what circumstances might you be willing to turn Gibbon over to us?”

This was said in a respectful tone of voice, as Rufus knew that Fudge and his henchwoman Umbridge had done much to offend the Centaurs over the years. Bane responded to this, his ego was flattered just enough to get the job done.

“You may have him whenever you wish, though he is slightly injured.”

While all four of them wanted to know Bane’s definition of ‘slightly’, none were so bold as to ask outright.

“Thank you, I would not dream of asking you where your camp is, so if you could have Gibbon deposited at the front door of the school here, it would be much appreciated.”

“That is acceptable, he will be here within the hour. All I ask in return is that we be kept out of this business.”

“Fair enough, but that leads one to ask why you got involved now.”

“Harry Potter was in danger, that is of interest to us. The heavens will not allow us to stand idly by while he is in direct danger, if there is something we can do to prevent it.” Which told them exactly squat, but then again that was the idea. Rufus sure wasn’t complaining.

“That works for me. Oh, one more thing: Something tells me that Shacklebolt would not have allowed you free reign to enter the building without escort.....”

“He is not seriously injured, though you should lecture him on being more decisive.”

Rufus chuckled a bit, it pleased him that one of Dumbledore’s men was responsible for the ‘breach’ in this case.

“I’ll make sure to do that. Will you be wanting to see Firenze while you are here? I understand that he dines in his private quarters during meal times.” Bane pondered this last question for a moment, perhaps a rapprochement was possible here. He knew that the Centaurs would now become more involved whether they liked it or not, perhaps it would be necessary to have an inside man with the magicals. He knew that he couldn’t seem to eager though.

“Tell him if he wishes to pay us a visit, he will not be harmed in any way.”

“We will make sure that he gets that message. Thank you for your assistance.”

“You are welcome Rufus Scrimgeour.” With a look to Prosna, who had not said a word or made a sound this entire time, the two Centaurs were off. The four of them looked at each for a second.

“Well that was interesting.”

“Yes it was Harry, and most illuminating. Gibbon is one of their top soldiers, this is a valuable catch. I wonder how injured he really is? I doubt he would have ‘confessed’ voluntarily.”

“What’s next Minister?”

“I don’t know Amelia. How long has it been since the fireworks started?”

“10 minutes, give or take.”

“We don’t dare let these people out of our collective sight right now. Travis, call in another crew and have them and one of our crews here stand guard inside and outside the Slytherin Common Room. Once we take Theo Nott into custody we might have an uprising on our hands there.” Rufus knew full well who the Slytherin leader was.

“I’ll go right now sir.” Travis left, and Rufus turned to Harry.

“Harry, have Dobby get a message to your people back there that you might not be home for lunch. We need to see this thing through to the bitter end here.”

“Yes sir.” Harry summoned Dobby, he didn’t bother with a note, since the elf had been there for the big stuff anyway.

“Make sure that they understand that I’m perfectly fine and unhurt, okay?” Neither of them thought that Murray and Sophie would truly believe that, but they still had to try.

“Yes Harry.” And Dobby was off. Just then a bloodied Kingsley appeared at the main door, and reported to his superiors.....or tried to, as Bones cut him off before he could say anything.

“Bane already told us what happened out there. Just make sure nothing else comes in the building, except for the prisoner they’re

going to deliver to us. Anyone else? Use your wands the moment they get within range.” Kingsley was not being dressed down only because his failure had led to the warning, so out of failure was born success. Sort of. He still looked chastened though.

“Yes ma’am. Will we put the castle in lockdown?” Rufus answered.

“Not yet, in fact I’m not willing to cancel the last Quidditch game yet. Let’s see what happens when they change into who they really are. Go back to your post Kingsley.” This was not said unpleasantly, and the large man beat a hasty retreat.

“Don’t come down too hard on him Amelia, I doubt any of us would be able to take a Centaur down if surprise was on their side.”

“Of course, his record won’t be stained by it.” Rufus then leaned over and whispered to her.

“Separate one Death Eater after you remove them from the room, one of the females. Take her back to The Ministry and have Marr put the biological tracker inside her, but come right back after you drop her off. Only you and Marr are to know about this beyond Travis and myself.”

Bones liked this idea quite a bit, and nodded her head that it would be done. Silence hung in the air for the next little while, as Theo Nott lost about five pounds by sweating, waiting for the inevitable. Harry sat back down with his friends, all of whom were willing to talk now that he was back with them. They peppered him with questions, even though he knew nothing more than Dobby’s early warning.

Rufus then went up to Dumbledore at the staff table, and in full hearing of most of them:

“Albus, is there anything you would like to share with me?” He asked this question a lot it seemed, and Dumbledore always hated that wording and tone of voice. He kept his reply civil though, and in a tired sounding voice:

“No Minister, I am just as surprised as you are by these events.” Rufus actually did believe that, he knew that Dumbledore needed Harry alive until the ultimate job was finished. Then the lad would kill him.

“If you say so. Charles?”

“Yes Minister?”

“How many doses of Veritaserum do you have available for my uses today?”

“Probably somewhere around 75, and I could get my hands on a like number if given three hours notice.” He had been ready for the question, answering it instantly.

“Please arrange for them then Charles, there is a lot of questioning to be done.” That wasn’t true, or so Rufus thought. He assumed that Theo Nott would break very quickly, and be in Azkaban before dinnertime. Fortunately for Slytherin their leader did not play Quidditch.

“Yes sir.” Shepherd left, passing Jenkins and his people as they came back in with seven stray students who hadn’t felt like lunch. They were kept separate from the rest of the student body, and got more than a few dozen accusatory glances. No Auror thought they were guilty though, a bit too obvious not to be in the room when the fireworks started.

It was a long 40 minutes to wait, and people finished their meals for lack of anything better to do. Very few talked at all, not wanting any attention drawn to them. Dumbledore still refused to say a word, and Harry stared hard at him for a full minute, daring him to do something. Hermione, sitting next to him at the table this time, noticed this. She whispered to him:

“You don’t really think that he had anything to do with this do you?” This was not Hermione the loyalist to Dumbledore talking, that Hermione didn’t exist any longer, this was the realist.

“Something’s wrong here Hermione, I can feel it.”

“I’m sure everything will be worked out.” She didn’t sound sure at all, and seemed to say it for lack of anything better. Harry didn’t respond, though he didn’t return to his staring contest with Dumbledore.

Soon Flint stopped being Hopper Matthews and became Marcus Flint again, as did the other soldiers, all of whom were Hogwarts graduates that the oldest students had been in school with. Right before this happened, Kingsley came back with the information that a trussed up Gibbon was waiting outside the Great Hall. He had lost some blood and would be limping for awhile, but was otherwise not in a bad way.

The six Death Eater bodies were dragged away to Dumbledore’s office, where Travis was personally delivering Gibbon, though one would be subtracted en route. Rufus detailed most of his Aurors to remain in the Great Hall, and personally assigned the Kate Sackoff crew, Tonks being the middle member, to make sure that Theo Nott did nothing but sit in his seat. There was no floo in the Great Hall, and the Owlery did not need to be closed, if only because no would be allowed to go there. Of the faculty, only Remus and Shepherd initially went to the Headmaster’s office, along with the old man himself, and Rufus was about to follow them when he went by the Gryffindor table.

“Come along Harry, no use pretending that you’re less important than you are here.” Agreeing with this completely, Harry rose, and the twins followed him. They did this with no objection coming from Rufus, who had assumed that they would anyway. The Minister gave one last look at the room.

“Arthur?”

“Yes Minister.”

“You’re in charge here until I return or say otherwise. No one is to leave this room without being summoned by me, and that includes any faculty.” McGonagall heard this and didn’t like it one bit, but every

Auror in the room was in a pissed off mood and she wasn't interested in challenging them quite yet.

“Of course sir.” Diggory was out of the country, though he would not have made a stink about this anyway.

“Thank you Arthur. Come along you three.”

The WWW three fell into step behind The Minister, the twins very pointedly taking out their wands, as Rufus' normal bodyguard detail remained in the room to watch over the students. There was little talking on the way to the office, and they entered the open door guarded by Mike Peplowski.

“Everyone is up there sir.”

“Good Mike, no one is to come through that door other than Charles Shepherd.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good man.”

He went up to find that Travis had secured the prisoners, with his old crew's help, and that Dumbledore was sitting in his chair, not moving at all. Flint had just regained consciousness, with Bones' help, and was shaking his head groggily. The Minister pulled up a chair in front of him.

“Marcus Flint I presume?”

“Yes.”

“You know who I am?”

“Yes I do, you're Fudge's replacement.”

“You see Harry over there?” Harry smiled and gave a slight wave to his old Quidditch foe.

“I do.”

“You failed.”

“So I had noticed.”

“Voldemort will be very unhappy with you, you understand this don’t you? Six of you and you couldn’t take out one seventh year student. He’s really not going to be very pleased.” A more friendly sounding taunt had never been thrown Flint’s way before, and he actually smiled, briefly.

Then he just sighed. He was like Nott in that he had assumed failure would mean death, not capture. He saw no downside to cooperating here, and plenty of upside.

“I’m the last person who needs to be reminded of that.”

“Who is your inside person here?”

“I don’t know, they don’t tell me things like that. Veritaserum will confirm it, I have no motive to lie here, wasting time won’t do me any good.”

“A pragmatist I see.”

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

“So Gibbon would know more then I take it?”

“That’s your job to find out. All I do is follow orders.”

“Where do your orders come from?”

“Gibbon, Black, or Pettigrew, depending on the situation.” The middle name gave everyone a start.

“Black?”

“That’s what Bellatrix Lestrange calls herself now, Bellatrix Black.” Ahhhhh, Harry’s and Remus’ pulses returned to normal upon hearing that explanation, and Flint very briefly smiled at their consternation.

“Interesting, very interesting.”

“Not really, but if you say so.”

“How were you planning to get out?”

“We were to race out in the confusion, our inside person was to help there, I probably would have found out who it was then. Then Gibbon would have met us outside and gotten us back to Headquarters.”

Rufus turned to Bones.

“Take these five back to The Ministry and put them in secure lock-up. We’ll do the Veritaserum questioning there.” Flint coughed to get his attention.

“I am prepared to strike a deal.”

“We don’t need to deal, what with the drugs we can force you to take.” Rufus let the line out a little more, hoping to hook his fish.

“True, but you need to know the right questions to ask.”

“What do you want?”

“Let me leave the country, I’ll sign an Oath guaranteeing never to return to Britain for the rest of my life. You do that, and I’ll give you everything I know, including pensieve memories of all our engagements and my meetings with my superiors, you’ll gain a lot of

insight into your enemies. The memories will flow a lot better if I give them willingly and you know it.” Yes he did, and Rufus was sorely tempted to take that deal, it would cost him nothing, and save the taxpayers of magical Britain the cost of feeding this thug for the rest of his life.

“I’ll let you know before the day is out. Amelia, take them away, and make sure that Flint here is not ill-treated.” He didn’t say anything about the other four, and Flint noted this immediately.

“Yes Minister.”

She and Edgar Stiles supervised the removal of the prisoners, and now the only Death Eater in the room was Gibbon, who was still out of it. Shepherd walked into the room and handed his godfather a vial of Veritaserum, and Rufus nodded to Travis.

Biller walked over to Gibbon and woke him up.

“Hello Gibbon.”

Gibbon, once he regained his faculties, knew that he was now better off than he was an hour ago.....and then proceeded to wreck it.

“Go to hell Biller.” At least he knew from where the blade would fall.

Travis looked over at Harry.

“Repulsar is that spell you like so much, right Harry.”

“Yes it is.”

“Thank you.” Biller then placed the tip of his wand right at an arrow hole.

“REPULSAR!”

Gibbon was a tough man, but this on top of his other injuries was just too much, and he screamed very loudly.

“Shall we try again Gibbon? I said hello, now you say hello back.”

“Hello for Merlin’s sake!”

“That’s better. Who is your inside person at Hogwarts?”

Gibbon hesitated a bit too long, and Biller nailed him again, in a different arrow hole.

“REPULSAR!”

Repeat the screaming.

“Okay, okay! It’s Nott’s brat, that’s who!” One can only take so much.

Rufus was about to motion to Sarah Westbrook, but she and Rob Graham were already heading down the office stairs.

“Good, good. Now open wide so I can put the Veritaserum in your mouth. You resist, and I’ll use that spell in one of your ears. Something tells me that it might have a deleterious effect on your hearing.”

Gibbon didn’t hesitate and opened his mouth as wide as he could. Travis dropped the drug in, and waited for it to take effect.

Just as he was about to start the questioning, Graham and Westbrook came back with Theo Nott. Rufus just smiled pleasantly at him.

“Well hello there Theo, please have a seat. You know Royal Gibbon don’t you?”

Theo didn’t say a word, he just sat down in the chair proffered to him and watched. His wand had been taken from him during his very public arrest a few minutes ago, and he no longer had any fantasies about fighting his way out.

Travis ran Gibbon through the initial questions, satisfying them all that Gibbon, Dark Mark present on his arm or not, was in fact a real Death Eater who saw Voldemort on a daily basis. Other than a memory modified Lucius Malfoy, this was the first such one they had captured alive in quite some time.

“Who is your contact here at Hogwarts?”

“Theodore Nott, son of Frederick.”

“Is the boy sitting here that Theodore Nott?”

“Yes it is.”

“Did he provide you with the hairs necessary for Flint and his people to infiltrate the castle?”

“I don’t know, I was not in charge of that part of the operation.”

“How were you to get out of here?”

“I was not supposed to be in the castle at all. Nott was supposed to hide the assault force until the castle had calmed down, then I was to lead them back to Knockturn Alley, where we were supposed to be met.”

“By whom?”

“I don’t know, they would see me and take us back. Only Black, Pettigrew, and our Master know where the Headquarters is.” This was good information, and all the Auror types filed this away for future use.

“Is it in Britain?”

“Yes, on an island somewhere. The Orkneys if I was to guess, but I don’t know for sure.”

Travis paused for breath, and Harry put his two Knuts in.

“Is anyone on the Hogwarts faculty a Death Eater or sympathizer?”

“Not exactly.” And bingo was his name-o.

“What the hell does that mean?!” That was more than one of them asking that, and Nott was the only one smiling, as if knowing the punch line to a private joke. Gibbon then decided to tell them his theory, it was not a fact that he knew for sure, so it was not covered by the Veritaserum. He figured that things might go easier on him if he let it out.

“I overheard part of a conversation once, between our Master and Black. They were saying something about Dumbledore and Voldemort having private peace talks.”

And the world seemed to end for a second.

Just for a second, as Graham, Westbrook, and Stiles all whipped their wands and pointed them at Dumbledore, who still just sat there, though everyone now knew why. Rufus quickly looked at Gibbon.

“Would you care to elaborate?” He would.

“That’s all I heard, that Dumbledore was attempting to negotiate peace via owl post, and our Master was willing to see how far he would go in making concessions. He thought it a joke more than anything, it did not sound like he took it seriously.” Nott was still smiling as he heard this, and decided to add fuel to the fire.

“It’s been going on for about four months, in case you were wondering.”

They were wondering in point of fact. All eyes again turned to Dumbledore, and Rufus asked him.

“I notice that you aren’t refuting any of this Albus.”

“No, I have been in communication with Voldemort, asking what his terms would be for a formal peace treaty.” Harry was now smiling openly after he heard this, as Rufus asked, very politely:

“Interesting. And what gave you the authority to do this?”

“My position as Supreme Mugwump. I know that I cannot bind The Ministry to any deal that is struck, but I wanted to see what I could get all the same.”

Rufus did not immediately reply to this, but instead motioned to the twins.

“Fred, George, would you please go get Professors Flitwick and McGonagall please.”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes sir.”

The twins left, and Rufus looked at Bones.

“Floo The Ministry and have them tell Flint that his deal is acceptable.”

Why he was doing this now of all times, Bones was unclear on, but she obeyed him without question. There was quiet until the twins came back with the teachers, and Rufus addressed them.

“Are you aware that Headmaster Dumbledore has been engaging in off the book peace talks with Voldemort?”

McGonagall looked like she was about to faint dead away, while Flitwick looked almost as shattered.

“I will take that as a no. Albus, I honestly don’t know what to do with you. I agree that your position in our government and in the International Confederation make this a gray area, and likely not

treason.” He stopped there, and Dumbledore felt free to say something.

“Thank you Minister, my communication has not gone beyond the owl stage, and one of the stumbling points was that I insisted that you be present at any face to face meeting.”

“Well I appreciate that Albus. You understand that you have a Veritaserum conversation in your near future, to confirm all of this?”

“I do, and I will submit to it willingly.”

“Good, if you do that, and nothing heinous is found during it, then I can assure you that you will not be arrested.”

Everyone was rather shocked at how calmly Rufus was dealing with all of this. Bones had expected to be arresting the old man, and she certainly wanted to. This was the last misstep as far as she was concerned, however nimbly the Headmaster had skirted the legality of it all.

“Thank you Minister, I look forward to sharing with you the correspondence, I have kept all of the notes.”

“Good, it should be a fun read. One thing though, before we start the myriad of Veritaserum conversations I have in store for me today.”

“And what is that?”

Rufus did not answer right away, and pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. He helped himself to the quill on Dumbledore’s desk, scribbling something on the paper.

“It has become increasingly clear to me over the last year Albus, that you have too much on your plate. Your backdoor attempts at diplomacy are only the last examples of that, and I believe it’s time that I did something about it.” He slid the paper across the desk to Dumbledore.

“As of this moment you are hereby terminated as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

It was the paper that Rufus had shown Harry back in July, the undated order of termination. Well it wasn't undated any longer.

McGonagall still didn't know what to say, and Flitwick was trying to figure out his own reaction, when Rufus turned to another faculty member, and dropped merely the latest bombshell of the day so far.

“Remus Lupin, are you prepared to take over as acting Headmaster for the remainder of the academic year?”

Remus' eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets, and he noticed that this seemed to spur McGonagall and Flitwick, who were opening their mouths to probably object, even if Dumbledore was stunned into silence. So he figured he should respond quickly.

“Yes I am Minister.”

End Chapter

A/N II: Happy Easter to all of you, next update is in three weeks.

Author's Note: Thank you for the great response to the last chapter, it's easily the most reviewed chapter of The Brave New World so far, I appreciate it. Oh, for those of you who despaired at my evil cliffhanger, just think of how much more evil it could have been: I could have cut it off before Remus said he would take the job. Now that would have been evil, I'm giggling just at the thought. But I'm not that cruel. At least three weeks ago I wasn't that cruel. Take that as you will.

Saturday, October 4, 1997, continued

11:55 am GMT

Office of the Headmaster, Hogwarts

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"Yes I am Minister."

Dumbledore was still processing the fact that he had been fired, and barely heard any of this. McGonagall, who still couldn't believe that her mentor actually thought that Voldemort would be willing to negotiate a breakfast menu let alone peace terms, was yanked out of her thoughts upon hearing all of this.

"Excuse me, did I hear that properly?"

"If you heard that I just appointed Remus to be Headmaster, yes." Yes, she knew she had heard correctly, and went past astounded, and GO, and right to her main argument.

"I am the Deputy Headmistress, if Professor Dumbledore is to be relieved of his duties....."

She didn't get to the end of the sentence before Rufus overrode her.

“Oh please Minerva, what would be the point in firing him if I'm to promote you in his place? Same thing with Filius here. You're both Dumbledore's right and left hand people, and while I'm glad that he has competent lieutenants, neither of you is going to lead this school. You toe his line without overt question, and that makes you complicit in the shoddy running of this school.” She bridled at hearing that last bit, as she always did when Harry brought it up to her, the fact that it was the Minister saying it now made no real difference to her.

“Why do I hear Umbridge talking?” That Rufus had railroaded Umbridge into Azkaban with a trial that was one level above rigged seemed to be lost on McGonagall at the moment, and no one knew that better than Rufus.

“Because I'm daring to disagree with you and your former Headmaster, that's why. You don't like that, and never have. That's why Harry felt that he couldn't come back here, once he broke free of your yoke. That's why seven sets of parents refused the Hogwarts letter this year, and enrolled their children at Michael Collins or Endeavor instead. There is an arrogance to your collective attitudes that is poisoning this school. We need new blood here, and Remus is it. Werewolf or not, his intellect and loyalty to our side of the fence are unquestioned. Plus I've heard report after report on how much he cares for the well being of the students. That's what we need right now, someone with their eyes on the ball.” Remus was involuntarily smiling at the compliments, he and Rufus were not close friends at all, which made it all the sweeter. McGonagall was now resigned to this, but for Dumbledore's benefit she covered all the bases, though she was wishing mightily that Flitwick would join her.

“The Board of Directors agreed to this? To Remus' being the one to take over?” She was sure that they did, being Rufus' puppets for the most part. He had not just reorganized the Wizengamot into his image, he had covered all of his bases, so to speak.

“Yes they did, I have had Remus as my backup plan for six months now, not that he knew it. Remus, if you do a good job then I can guarantee you the permanent position without an interview process. At the very least you will regain your position as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, as you have proven to be the best instructor for that in many years.” Not saying much, but Remus again appreciated the compliment, and his first question dealt with that same topic.

“Who will take over for me there?”

Rufus took a deep breath, and turned to Sarah Westbrook, who beat him to the punch.

“I’ll do it.” She did not sound thrilled, but she did not sound hesitant either. Harry and the twins, silent for the last minutes, perked up immediately, they were very fond of Sarah. Remus nodded that this was fine with him, the DOM’s had sung her praises to him.

And the deep breath was exhaled, gratefully, by Rufus. He had been a little afraid that either Sarah would hesitate a little too long, or Remus would insist on the still inexperienced Tonks, or both.

“Thank you Sarah. I’m glad that that’s acceptable Headmaster Lupin.” Dumbledore flinched violently at hearing that, and was finally yanked out of his stupor.

“You are really going through with this? This is not some stunt to bring a smile to your face and Harry’s?” That was not a half bad idea, and The Minister was kicking himself for not trying that when it really would have been a joke. He looked over at Harry and could tell that his protégé was thinking much the same. After exchanging sardonic glances with Harry, he turned back to the old man.

“No it isn’t Albus. I’m something of a jokester when I have the time, but I would not joke about this. No, you need to adjust your priorities some, and our community needs a Headmaster that will focus on the students and their needs. Remus, I won’t ask you to resign your membership in The Order, but I will ask you to take a leave of absence from it for the time being.”

“That won’t be a problem Minister.”

“Good. Fred, George, if you would go retrieve the rest of the faculty for me please, and tell Sanford that we will be returning in about 10 minutes. Tell him that an announcement is to be made, but not what it is just yet.” The twins weren’t happy about missing any fireworks, but were pleased that Rufus was relying on them.

“Yes sir.”

“Of course sir.”

They left, and Dumbledore felt compelled to ask more questions before the rest of his faculty arrived.

“And am I being allowed to keep my other positions?”

“For the time being, I will not attempt to have you removed as Head of the Wizengamot. In fact we’re going to continue your correspondence with Voldemort, under strict supervision of course. I also won’t interfere with your status in the International Confederation.” Now that the man had won, he didn’t see the need to rub it in, but none of this was set in stone. He said nothing about Dumbledore’s titular role as Head of the League, he was still chewing on that. There was potential to do something there, though he would prefer Bones heading up The League all in all.

“As far as the public goes, what will be the story?”

“You will resign due to the day’s events, you’ll tell The Daily Prophet that you feel you need to concentrate more fully on winning the war against Voldemort. McCrae will get an exclusive, which should keep him somewhat quiet. I hope all of you understand that the knowledge of Albus corresponding with Voldemort does not leave this room or this group of particular people?” They all nodded that it was understood. Rufus turned to Graham.

“Rob, take Gibbon and Nott back to The Ministry and put them in separate holding cells, no communication with each other, or the other Death Eaters we have in custody.”

“Right away boss.”

First though, Harry wanted to wipe the smile off of Nott’s face, and figured that he was owed a little fun here. So he slipped his wand into his hand and pointed it right at Theo:

“Roctrotra.”

The Choking Curse, and Nott felt it right away, as no one but the twins had seen Harry even take out his wand.....the two of them knew something of the like was coming and had been watching him pretty closely, when they weren’t watching Dumbledore.

The trouble was, Harry had not pointed it at Nott’s throat. Think somewhere a bit further down, as Harry walked toward Nott.

“You wanted me dead eh? You were hoping your incompetent cohorts would snuff me out? Well it didn’t work did it Theo? You failed, just as you people always do. I can’t be killed you know, except maybe by Voldemort, and even then he would have to show his face to actually try it. A snake, two traitor Professors, Snape, a quill, Umbridge, Lycans.....nothing has worked has it Theo? You know, I think the actual definition of the word ‘Slytherin’ is ‘failure’, or ‘to fail’ if you want to make it a verb. I pulled a Slytherin on that test. Yeah, that works.”

All the while this was going on, Nott’s minerals were being very slowly crushed, not that anyone in the room was interested in stopping it. Even Gibbon was looking interested in the demonstration, he was always on the lookout for new torture techniques, assuming he lived through the rest of the day. Nott did have one salient point to make though, while he still had the power of speech.

“Our Lord’s number two is a Gryffindor Potter, the man who handed over your parents to be slaughtered.” This was said in a strangled

kind of voice, as all thoughts of future children were being rendered more moot by the second.

“There’s always an exception Theo.” He took the Choking Curse off and proceeded to use his wand and hand both to whip Nott hard across the room into a wall. If Draco had been present, he would have winced in shared pain. Harry walked over to Nott, who was barely conscious on the floor, Bones and Travis nearest to him, doing nothing.

“When I get hold of your dear daddy Theo, I’m going to make him feel a lot worse than you do right now. Your boss picked on the wrong man you piece of shit, and his people.....well let’s just say I won’t be looking to take prisoners. Enjoy Azkaban.” He pointed his wand at Theo’s mouth, from a range of a meter, and loosed off:

“REPULSAR!”

Which knocked out some teeth, and Theo out like the proverbial light as his head slapped hard into the floor. Harry turned to the others in the room as he pocketed his wand, and any kindergartener could tell you that the expression on his face was clearly daring someone to say something.

And Rufus was that man.

“Rob, you should get going. Make sure you pick up Nott’s teeth before you go.”

Graham, after putting Silencing Charms on both prisoners, tied up Nott, collected seven teeth to put in his pocket, and floored them both back to Auror Command. Once this was done, Dumbledore took the floor again, but in a tired sounding voice devoid of fight. He hadn’t blamed Harry a bit for what he did, and better that the lad not focus on him for the time being, or things might get worse. At the very least he was grateful that Harry wasn’t urging Rufus on.

“What about the public’s reaction to a werewolf taking over a school filled with children? I’m sorry Remus, but that is a complication.”

Remus had assumed that this would come up from someone, but didn't have a chance to respond before Rufus beat him to the punch.

“Remus is the exception, everyone knows that. There will be letters, Howlers, I'll probably have some visitors to my office even. But everyone knows that he is safe and can be trusted, even if they won't admit it to anyone but themselves. Besides, none will want to cross me after an incident like this, they'll know that. Plus, part of the deal of you keeping your other positions will be your very public endorsement of my selection.” And the final shoe dropped. Everyone in the room was noticing that Dumbledore was not fighting this too much, and Harry was about to ask him why when the twins came back with the rest of the faculty, sans Firenze, as they did not know where his quarters were, which they would explain later. Rufus wasted no time in addressing them, making up the speech as he went along, but it was one he had been daydreaming about for years, he had had his eyes firmly on his current job for a long time.....and the changes he could make once he attained it.

“ Ladies and gentlemen of the Hogwarts faculty. Headmaster Dumbledore has been relieved of his duties effective immediately, and will be replaced by Professor Lupin for the foreseeable future. This is not a result of the attempted assassination of Harry Potter specifically, but a culmination of missteps and poor choices on his part. Professor McGonagall will remain as Deputy for the time being, and Sarah Westbrook from Auror Command will serve out the remainder of the year as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. The rest of you will be impacted only in that Headmaster Lupin's style will no doubt be different than Professor Dumbledore's, and that Sarah replaces him as the youngest Hogwarts Professor. Yes, the former Headmaster will be addressed as Professor, it's an Emeritus title and will be accorded him for the rest of his days, with respect. The public, and the students, will be told that Professor Dumbledore is resigning, due to his desire to focus on the war with Voldemort and the Death Eaters. But I felt that you should be leveled with. You will notice that there are no Hogwarts students in here, and that is deliberate, they need to know that the transition will be smooth and non-disruptive. Are there any questions?”

No one seemed to have any, this was not an unexpected move, and Dumbledore had been replaced temporarily or permanently for three of the last six years now, so this was old hat for them. The Hogwarts faculty, Defense notwithstanding, had been remarkably stable over the last few years, considering the extremely volatile political situation in their society. Harry and the twins were looking square at Hagrid during Rufus' speech, and the half-giant had rarely looked more at a loss. Hagrid and Remus had reasonably good relations on the whole, or at least they had until the wedding. Harry was half expecting Hagrid to leave in protest, but either he didn't have the courage to, or he was waiting for Dumbledore's reaction, or both.

Speaking of Dumbledore's reaction, he was finally moved to say some things:

"I would like to thank all of you for the support that you have given me over the years, it means a lot and always has. I hope you will support the new Headmaster, he is a fine man and will do well by our students. I am of course available to you whenever you wish to contact me, but I would encourage you to keep such communications to personal business, rather than the running of the school or of the war. I consider each and every one of you to be a good friend, and I hope that that will carry over to the rest of our days, colleagues or not."

That was exactly what Remus and Rufus had hoped he would say, a very classy farewell. Harry and the twins were still hard pressed not to gloat a little, but they would pop the cork on something back at the shop. This bombshell had pushed the assassination attempt to the back of Harry's mind, he found to his surprise now that he thought of it. Not counting his episode with Theo of course, but he was caught up in the moment here just like everyone else. He saw Remus stand up, the man had finally coalesced his thoughts:

"Folks, I didn't ask for or expect this honor, but I would lying if I said that I'm unwilling to accept it. I'm not really much for speeches or grand gestures, but I want you to know that my sole focus will be on Hogwarts and making our students more prepared for an outside world that gets more complicated for Wizards and Witches by the

week. You are all excellent teachers and I have no interest in interfering with your lesson plans or how you deal with your students, I know there are no Snapes left here. This office will be open to anyone who needs it to be, all day every day.”

There were murmurs of approval from most of the staff, and even Hagrid and McGonagall could find nothing to complain about there. Shepherd moved first, and walked over to Remus.

“Congratulations Headmaster.” They shook hands, the two of them were good friends anyway. There was soon a line, with Hill and Sinistra, the other members of their circle, leading it. Harry and the twins went last, after Hagrid, whose handshake was brief. Harry enveloped Remus into a hug which the twins joined.

“You’ll do a great job Moony, he couldn’t have picked anyone better.”

“He’s right Remus.”

“You’ll do great, a Marauder Headmaster, who’d have thought?” All four laughed, and before they let go:

“Harry, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“No, I didn’t have anything to do with it, nor did I even know about it. You earned this mate, all on your own.”

That indeed had been Remus’ question, and now he let the happiness grow within him, knowing that Rufus’ dislike of Dumbledore aside, he had earned this through his own volition. If he were under Veritaserum right now, he could easily say that this was the proudest moment of his life. They disengaged to find Rufus at their side.

“Headmaster.” He reached out his hand and Remus took it.

“Thank you Minister, thank you for the confidence you’re showing in me.”

“I know you won’t let me, or the students down. Now how about we inform them?”

“Sounds good.”

“Oh, Harry?”

“Mum’s the word sir. The old bastard resigned.” Harry was getting good at this anticipating questions business. Rufus nodded approvingly.

“I knew you would understand. I’ll have Rob go back with you, to explain to Joanne what happened. Her, you can tell the truth to, and your circle as well. They’re very loyal to you and I wouldn’t want that compromised by you having to withhold things.”

“I appreciate that sir.” Harry had been debating on how much to tell them, now he could just show a pensieve memory and be done with it. This just kept getting easier and easier.

“Nice display with Nott, I’m sure that he will have toilet issues for awhile.”

“It served it’s purpose.” Oh yes it did, and Rufus now more than ever wanted Harry working for him full-time. The idea of having Travis and Harry as his top men was very, very appealing. And both were quite young. He was now smiling as they left, and not just because Dumbledore had finally been put to heel.

The faculty and others filed out of the room and walked the relatively short distance back to the Great Hall, where there had been a buzz ever since the bulk of the faculty had left. Sanford Jenkins and Nelson DeMille, Travis’ main deputies, were in charge, and they looked relieved at the arrival. Hermione and company immediately locked on to the twins and Harry, hoping for a wink, nod, or some other hint of what might be coming. They were unrewarded, as Rufus, Remus, and Dumbledore walked in front of the faculty table. Rufus began:

“We have an announcement to make. Albus Dumbledore has just tendered his resignation as Headmaster of Hogwarts.” He waited for the explosion.....and he didn’t have to wait long.

Almost 300 voices were all going at once as people reacted. The more intuitive ones, like Neville for example, soon noticed that Dumbledore was there with them, and not arrested or otherwise in custody. Those intuitive type people further noticed that Remus of all people was standing with Dumbledore and The Minister, further raising their voices. Rufus let this go on for about 30 seconds, then he raised his arms for quiet. Which he got after about 10 more seconds.

“Yes, momentous news. Professor Dumbledore feels, after the assassination attempt earlier that he is better served by focusing on stopping Voldemort, and will devote his primary energies to that end, where I am positive that he will do our society a large measure of good. I am also pleased to inform you that Remus Lupin had graciously accepted the post of Headmaster of Hogwarts, effective immediately.” Another, somewhat more minor, explosion, which Rufus killed off almost immediately.

“Headmaster Lupin is known to all of you of course as an outstanding teacher and former Valedictorian of Hogwarts. Sarah Westbrook, an Auror crew leader, will be taking over as Defense teacher. Sarah got her start in Auror Command as a member of my crew, and she will continue on with Headmaster Lupin’s exemplary work.” He paused for breath, with no explosion this time fortunately. Not that this would last.

“I would also like to announce that Theodore Nott of Slytherin House has been arrested, on the charge of conspiracy to commit murder, by providing the Polyjuice material of six students to allow the would be assassins to gain access to Hogwarts castle.. It is considered unlikely that he acted alone in this matter, so the Slytherin v. Hufflepuff game is postponed until tomorrow at the earliest, so that we may find out if he had any accomplices. The Owlery is hereby off limits to non-faculty for the remainder of the day, your copies of

tomorrow morning's Daily Prophet should not be impacted." McCrae, who had been clueless about all of today's events until they happened, couldn't help but smile. Rufus motioned for Remus to say a few words, and the still dazed Marauder basically regurgitated his faculty speech, this not being his bag really, though he would soon be up to snuff at it. He had no clue how to proceed here, so he just turned the floor back over to Rufus, who had more to say.

"I'm going to ask you students to patient with us for a little longer, while we question Theodore Nott and find out if anyone has been helping him. Members of The Dark Force Defense League, our meeting today has been cancelled. Professor Dumbledore and I will be in contact as to the time and place of the next meeting, but I will ask you to remain here until everything is sorted out. Thank you all." Rufus mumbled some words to Dumbledore and Remus for a few seconds. He then walked over to McCrae, sitting at the far end of the faculty table.

"Come with me." McCrae got up and followed him over to the new Headmaster, who was standing more or less by himself near the faculty entrance. Until Tonks came up and tried to squeeze the life out of him. Rufus and McCrae waited until the celebration was over, and then got to business.

"Augustus, you have 15 minutes to interview Headmaster Lupin, and he will not be made available to any other publication, British or otherwise, until after tomorrow's Daily Prophet goes on sale."

McCrae, who's relationship with The Minister could best be described as 'complicated', looked very pleased, and reached out to shake Remus' hand, while still addressing Rufus.

"Thank you Minister, that is most generous of you. If I might indulge you for one more favor?"

"You may ask of course."

"I would like to meet Harry Potter."

Rufus wasn't really surprised by this request, and hoped that Harry wouldn't do anything rash. Hopefully his episode with Nott would have been enough to satisfy his current revenge needs.

"I'll see what I can do about that, but interview Headmaster Lupin first." Remus still had a reaction when someone called him Headmaster.

McCrae nodded, and he and Remus went back to Remus' soon to be vacated Defense office. Rufus turned to Travis.

"Get over to The Ministry and break Nott as quickly as you can, in minutes, not hours. Find out who his henchmen are here and I meant pronto." That was his Head Auror's specialty after all.

"I'll be back before you know it." Travis immediately went back to the Headmaster's office to floo back. Rufus looked around and things seemed to be getting back to normal. The elves, at someone's instruction, were serving another round of dessert. The DOM's took the opportunity to gather around the WWW three. Neville was first:

"They don't really expect us to believe that he resigned do they?"

"That's the general idea Neville, and not everyone in here is as smart as you are, so I think most will buy it."

"What really happened?"

"That is not a conversation that should take place here and now Hermione. No, it isn't a matter of trust, but we have about 200 sets of eyeballs aimed at us right now." He could see her revving up to say something about trust.

"Then let's go back to the Common Room and talk there."

There was a wee problem with that, though Harry had been loathe to admit it until now.

“I don’t want to go in there Hermione, not this time. It’s hard enough for me to be here at all, I don’t need more.”

Hermione searched her memory for bad things that had happened to Harry in there, and was at a loss to come up with one. She didn’t argue the point though, as Harry was under enough strain today as it was, both before and after the assassination attempt. She took a different tack next:

“Did you know about this ahead of time?”

“Remus? No I didn’t, and that was the first thing he asked me too. No, this is just The Minister showing everyone that he can do what he damn well pleases, and that includes putting a werewolf in charge of Hogwarts. I mean Remus can do the job I have no doubt about that, but other than Shepherd and Firenze he’s the least senior of the teachers. I wonder how many of them are pissed that he was elevated like he was.”

It turned out that only McGonagall was truly pissed, with Flitwick perhaps a tiny bit disappointed, he still was not saying much. Flitwick in fact had been offered the chance to interview for the Headmaster job when Dippet had retired, but he turned it down, knowing that Dumbledore wanted it, and was better qualified on the whole. The rest of the faculty knew that someone Defense capable needed to be in charge of the school during this period, and all of them save Miss Minerva and Hagrid, liked Remus a great deal on a personal level, which solved a lot of problems. There probably wouldn’t have been protests if Flitwick or McGonagall had gotten the job, but they were not the popular teachers amongst their colleagues that they had been before the arrival of Harry Potter in 1991, with his attendant issues.

Speaking of Miss Minerva, she walked over to Dumbledore and put up a Silencing Bubble around them.

“Albus, what were you thinking?”

“I’m assuming that you are referring to my correspondence with Voldemort?”

More passive-aggressiveness, and McGonagall, who for the record had never had any romantic feelings for her former boss, was finally at her wit's end with it.

"Of course I'm talking about that Albus you git!" Thank goodness for the Silencing Bubble.

"I wanted to see if there was any chance there, any at all." He didn't raise his voice, and again sounded defeated.

"And is there?"

"I don't know Minerva, but I doubt it. Voldemort demanded things that our society would never give him, willingly anyway." He would save the details for later, he had made copies of the notes, which were hidden in a secure location, just in case.

"Why did you never tell me about this? Did you tell anyone?"

"I told Alastor at the beginning, and he warned me that something like this would happen if I was found out, or if Voldemort released copies of my notes. That's why I didn't tell you, I wanted your shocked look in my office today to be genuine and real. I believe the muggles refer to it as plausible deniability. That's what I wanted for you, so you would not go down with me."

This made perfect sense, but McGonagall was still angry, and she quickly explained why.

"That is all well and legalistic of you Albus, but I was blamed wasn't I? That's why Remus is now in charge of the school, because I was tainted by your actions."

"Yet you were not relieved of your duties."

She wanted to throw up her hands, but was aware that a lot of students were very interested in this byplay, which is why her hands were currently behind her back, wand in her pocket.

“That is coming Albus, believe me. Sinistra will be Deputy by Christmas, all it will take is one false move, or a perceived false move, and Remus will ask for my ouster.” Ever the pessimist, though in actuality Remus was still processing the day’s events and hadn’t thought that far ahead yet. Well he would in a couple of minutes, as McCrae was bold enough to bring it up in his interview, not that the publisher would get a straight answer.

“I will speak to him, and so you will you, in private for each. You must cooperate with him Minerva.”

“Why are you cooperating with them at all is my question.”

“Because while my intentions were good, what I was doing does seem, on the surface, to be questionable. Rufus will demand to know why he wasn’t informed, and I do not have an answer that will satisfy him.” If such a thing existed, he thought but didn’t say.

“You suspect him, don’t you? You suspect him of being in sympathy with Voldemort.”

“Yes Minerva, the thought has crossed my mind, however unlikely. But ultimately, I think he will press for The Dark Lord’s defeat, and encourage Harry to remain in The United States, once he has won his battle. Then he will have no rivals, and he will have total power, however democratic it may look to casual scrutiny.” And there it was, the best, and probably only, reason McGonagall was going to get out of her mentor of why he was doing what he was doing. Not that she liked it mind you.

“Are you going to run against him for Minister in the Spring election?”

“Yes I am.” There was some length of silence after that, as McGonagall took the implications of that in.

Meanwhile, Rufus had been watching everyone do their business, hoping that Travis would be back very quickly. Harry saw him at loose ends, and walked over.

“Well this seems to be going fine.”

“Better than I had expected Harry. Do your friends believe that you had no prior knowledge of my plans?”

“Nope.” He and Rufus shared a laugh.

“I had only told Travis, and he did try to talk me out of it.” Biller had wanted him to promote one of the more obscure teachers, like McDowell or Vector, someone who would not be a lightning rod to one side or the other.

“To no avail obviously. How is the pureblood brigade going to react?”

“Ultimately Harry, they will choose competence over any other compelling factor. Besides, Remus is a pureblood who was essentially raped, in a manner. Just like Draco, and there were relatively few calls for his expulsion. Remus has taught here for over two years, if he was going to flip out on us he would have done so already. People will understand that.”

“You hope.”

“Yes, but.....” He was interrupted by Biller running in, and handing him a piece of parchment.

“Those are the names, the people we need to arrest.” Nott had broken quickly under the drugs, though his questioning was continuing as they spoke, with Patrick Cleburne, the Head Unspeakable taking over in the pinch. As good as Biller was at ‘physical coercion’, Cleburne was that much better, an artist. Poor Theo.

Rufus scanned the list, and was agog, it was 20 names, not all of them Slytherins either, as Biller had helpfully put the Houses of the students next to their names.

“Very well Travis, do what needs to be done.”

“Yes Minister.” He took the paper back and made copies of it, handing them to various Aurors.....and one to Harry, Fred, and George. He pointed to the name on it and jerked his head toward the Gryffindor table.

No, it was not one of our players, thankfully, and much to the relief of the WWW three, who were to act as members of the League. His name was Jeremiah Cotton, a Fourth Year who was one of the Beaters on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry and the twins had been hearing about him for over a year from Ron and Ginny, but nothing in their letters, and the July experience, had hinted that he was Death Eater implicated. But Veritaserum never lies, and never allows it's victims to lie. The three of them advanced on the Gryffindor table, where Cotton seemed to be expecting something like this. Fred did the talking, as official sounding as he was capable of being:

“Jeremiah Cotton, in the name of The Ministry of Magic, you are hereby under arrest on the charges of treason and conspiracy to commit murder. This isn't muggle television, so you have no rights under the law. You will come quickly and quietly or you will be harmed. Stand up very carefully and hand your wand to one of my brothers.” Cotton did so without a fuss, ignoring the incredulous looks on the faces of his Housemates, giving his wand to George as he was pretty sure that Harry was not a Weasley. He would later reveal under Veritaserum that he had been nothing more than a sleeper agent, under the direction of Theo Nott, just waiting for the final battle to kick off. Then his instructions were to kill Ron and Hermione in particular, and Neville and Ginny if possible. His sole motivation was cash, he was on retainer and got paid 100 galleons per month to do precisely nothing, plus a phat bonus for every dead body he created, once the time came.

Scenes like this were happening all over The Great Hall, and none of those arrested put up a fight. Of the 20 arrested, there was one Gryffindor, one Hufflepuff, Harry's old friend Zacharias Smith, five Ravenclaws, and 13 Slytherins, including Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle, and Millicent Bulstrode. Only Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass remained in the Slytherin Class of 1998, though perhaps a little deeper digging by Ministry officials would do something about even that meager number.

McCrae and Remus came back from their interview just in time to see the bad 20 marched out the main doors, a like number of Aurors covering them from all sides. The ones who knew how to Apparate were stunned before they got to the main gates, and everyone took the portkey ride back to The Ministry, where it would be an exceedingly busy afternoon and evening.

Inside, Rufus brought Harry over to McCrae and Remus.

"Harry Potter, I would like you to meet Augustus McCrae, owner and publisher of The Daily Prophet." The look on Harry's face clearly said that it was not his pleasure, but McCrae reached out his hand anyway, and a reluctant Boy Who Lived shook it.

"We meet at last Harry, it's long overdue."

"Your coverage of me might have had something to do with it." Our boy still didn't look happy, but his tone of voice could just be called polite.

"You're very hard to cover Harry, being such a polarizing figure and all. But our dear Minister has worked hard to convince me of your considerable virtues, and I'm looking forward to a more positive future for us." 'Worked hard' included Rufus threatening to start giving exclusives to his old roommate Bruce Lovegood at The Quibbler. Not that Bruce wanted them, he had no interest in being a competitor, directly, to McCrae. But McCrae, who found The Quibbler to be very amusing as it was, didn't need to know of his fellow publisher's reluctance.

“I’ll believe it when I see it, but I’ll keep an open mind. The twins control our advertising budget anyway, I have no formal role in the running of the shop, other than being it’s American manager.” And supplier of Dobby and Winky, their talents were major factors in the success of the American market.

“I know, a very successful business you three have built, it’s to be admired.”

“Thank you.” For lack of anything better to say really, but he would not be rude when no rudeness was coming at him.

“When you come back for Christmas, as I assume you will at some point, let’s sit down for a lunch and have a talk. All off the record of course, unless you want to give some deep background.”

Harry shifted his gaze to Rufus for a moment, and his mentor clearly wanted him to agree. And since the man had let Harry torture Theo Nott without a word of protest, he was inclined to give him what he wanted in this case.

“Fair enough, if I don’t dislike anything I see about me or our business over the next 10 weeks, I’ll meet you for lunch at The Leaky Cauldron on Boxing Day.” That was December 26, and sure enough, Rufus looked pleased, as did McCrae.

“That works for me Harry, I’m already looking forward to it. Minister, do we need to remain here any longer?” The ‘we’ meaning League members.

“No, we’re done here for the time being. Thanks Augustus.” Only his friends called him ‘Gus’.

“Anytime. Nice to meet you Harry.” He walked toward the front doors and fairly sprinted to the Apparition zone, where he could get back to the office. The next day’s paper would be jam packed indeed.

Harry looked at Rufus and smiled.

“The things I put up with for my friends.”

“Thank you Harry, the better you two get along, the better off we are all going to be.” He had smiled at the friend comment, he thought of Harry in the same way.

“What about the game tomorrow? Do I need to come back for that?”

“Well is there going to be a game tomorrow is my question. Charles!”

Shepherd ambled over, he had been talking with Blaise and Daphne about the new way of things in Slytherin, which had been gutted by the arrests today, and who knows how many more to follow.

“Yes Minister?”

“How many of the Slytherins arrested were on the Quidditch team?”

“I was just finding out that very thing sir, and the answer is two, a Chaser and a Beater. Blaise assures me that they will have a team on the pitch tomorrow, ready to go. Hufflepuff lost Smith from their team, so it won't be too much of an advantage for them.” Indeed all four Quidditch teams had lost personnel this day, and Ron was already canvassing for a new Beater.

“Good, then the game will go on as scheduled, next week. I want to give my people time this weekend to make sure that there are no more weeds in our garden.”

“Yes sir, are we talking 2:00 pm next Saturday then?” He was looking at both Remus and Rufus when he said this.....Remus had not been told that Shepherd was The Minister's godson, not that any other faculty member knew, though it would not have taken too much digging to find out.

“Headmaster, what do you think?”

“Sounds fine by me, I agree that you should have the extra time to complete your ‘research’.”

Rufus smiled at that, it was a charming way of putting it, it was nice to have a Headmaster who wouldn't disagree with him just for the hell of it.

“Indeed. Now Harry, that makes a conflict for you doesn't it?”

“Yes it does, we have the early game at 10:00 am, that's 4:00 pm here.....and I really do need my rest, I'm playing Seeker again.” He didn't really think Rufus would make him show up, and was immediately proven right.

“Well then enjoy your game, and your expected win of course, tell Fred and George that they're excused as well, but only if they go to your game. Otherwise they need to be here at the Pitch. Now there is but one thing left to do here, before we Ministry lot go back to the office.” He paused, and Remus filled the void.

“You want to see Dumbledore's correspondence with Voldemort.”

“I do, and while I'm sure that the old man has copies somewhere, I want to see the originals, and I want you two to see them as well, you're both impacted here very heavily. Come with me.” The three of them collected Travis and Dumbledore along the way, and went back to the Headmaster's office, the twins remaining behind as they took upon themselves to help Ron with his Beater search. Rufus didn't stop them, much as he liked having them around, figuring that if Remus, Harry, Travis and himself couldn't stop the old man from trying a breakout, two more wands probably wouldn't help matters much. They got to the office in short order, and first things first.

“Okay Albus, first I want the notes, then I want to watch you pack your things. Remus will be needing his new quarters after all. Nothing is to be left behind, of the physical or magical variety, am I clear?” Dumbledore was barely listening, as he was unlocking a series of locks in one particular drawer of his desk. The desk was coming with

him, though to where was a question he would soon be asked, as Dumbledore had lived in Hogwarts castle since before World War II.

“You are.” He finished his unlocking, and handed a pair of folders to Rufus. One contained copies of his own letters to Voldemort, the other contained the responses from the bad man himself. All of them had muggle post-it notes on them, with the dates of sending and receipt handwritten. Rufus sorted them out chronologically, and started reading, passing them to Travis, who passed them to Remus, and then on to Harry. The first one, from Dumbledore to Voldemort, was short, but very revealing.

Hello Tom,

I hope this note finds you in a receptive mood. I would like to explore the possibility of peace between our two sides of the conflict. I do not speak for Rufus Scrimgeour, and the world knows that I do not speak for Harry Potter, but I feel that a sizable portion of our population thinks as I do about the war, if we are even to call what is going on a war. I would like to know what you hope to gain out of our conflict, and what common ground we can share.

I want to say upfront that this is not a trap of any kind, this note has no hidden charms or portkeys, as I am sure your scan has discovered.

Again, I hope you view this note with an open mind, I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Head of The Order of the Phoenix, Head of the Wizengamot of Great Britain, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards.

Rufus read it with a creeping smile, the note was typical Dumbledore: optimistic and friendly, all without saying a damn thing, and he noted the lack of mention of his Hogwarts title. He quickly looked at the reply from Voldemort.

Albus,

What are you offering?

Lord Voldemort

That was abrupt, and again, totally in character with the Voldemort that Rufus knew of.....he and Travis had never seen the 'man' face to face, aside from Harry's pensieve memories. He read the subsequent notes, there were 12 sets of notes in all, over the next 20 minutes in relative silence, pausing only to make sure that the old man was indeed packing his things as instructed. And he was, there was a lot of stuff over the course of 60 years plus, and even with magic, it still took the 20 minutes to get it all done.

The notes were 80 percent Dumbledore begging and wheedling, with the remainder being Voldemort pushing his nemesis further and further into a corner. Among his demands:

That Rufus decline to run for re-election in March, and no other names being the ballot beside Voldemort's.

That all members of the Wizengamot resign upon the results of the election being ratified, with Voldemort himself, as the new Minister, choosing the new members.

That Dumbledore resign as Headmaster of Hogwarts upon completion of the academic year, with the Hogwarts Board of Governors doing the same. Not a big stretch to imagine who would appoint their collective replacements.

That Harry agree to stay outside of Europe for the rest of his life, with visits for weddings and funerals to be allowed on a case by case basis. He would not be allowed to represent England in international Quidditch play, or be allowed to play professionally in Europe or in Euro-based games if he took American citizenship. It was implied, rather than stated outright, that the Weasley clan should relocate as well. The thing that made Rufus laugh, was that the Harry demand

was the most reasonable of the bunch. Not saying a whole lot really though.

Those were just the four big ones mind you, there were about a dozen smaller ones that in and of themselves were liable to piss off a major portion of the population. Dumbledore had not technically agreed to anything, other than to make his best effort to get Voldemort on the ballot alongside Rufus, saying that if Voldemort was really what was best for magical Britain, then he should have little trouble persuading the populace to elect him. That said, nothing treasonous was said or promised on Dumbledore's side, and it did appear as though he was simply leaving no stone unturned in his quest for a peaceful society.

Rufus looked at Harry, the last in line, and when the younger man was done with the final set of notes:

"Albus, on what planet did you think that I would agree to any of this?"

"I did not, which is why negotiations went no further than they did."

"You really thought he could be bargained with? Voldemort?"

"I wanted to at least try Minister, there was no harm in trying." Well yeah, about that.....

"I beg to differ Albus, all that maniac has to do is release your notes and I would need to hold a lottery to decide which of our citizens got to try to kill you first! And what if he tries the forgery angle, like he did with Draco's kidnapping? I don't need to remind you that that handwriting was dead on, and we can't keep having you take Veritaserum every time that happens either. We would run out, or worse, you would build up a tolerance to it and then we would be up a creek." It was scientifically unproven whether such a tolerance could be built-up or not, and Rufus was going to have a talk with Robert Marr about it as soon as he could catch his breath.

“I know now that it is fruitless, but lives could have been saved if Voldemort was the slightest bit reasonable.”

Rufus had never respected the old man less than he did after that statement, just the sheer lunacy of the idea of Voldemort being reasonable. He turned to Harry.

“Harry, would you have agreed to those conditions he demanded?”

“For 100 million galleons maybe.” That was \$500 million dollars, and Harry would easily have agreed to that. He just would have imported to America everyone he cared about in Britain. Rufus chuckled.

“I doubt that the bad man would have given you a last portkey to collect all of your things from Godric’s Hollow, let alone any cash to go along with it. In fact, I’m sure he would have wanted the house too.”

“Then my answer is no.”

“Good man. Remus, your thoughts?” It was Headmaster in front of any students, but Remus in private.

Remus was now at a crossroads of sorts. Dumbledore had been very good to him over the years, while at the same time being too good to Snape and clearly not good enough to Harry, among others. He could not forget though, that most of the relatively little kindness he had received for a decade in his life, had come from Dumbledore. Yet now here was The Minister, who had elevated him to what in his heart of hearts was his dream job, a job that he never thought he would be able to get. And while he knew that this appointment was something of a nose thumbing by Rufus, he also knew that it wasn’t done lightly, and that there were other candidates who would have pissed people off just as much as he did. He temporized with a question.

“Who knew about this on our side Albus?”

“Only Alastor.” Moody was the unofficial Deputy of the Order, and was so secretive that he refused to allow Dumbledore to make his position official, or even known to anyone else.

“That was your mistake, trying to go around those who would have to sign off on any deal. You wanted to be the hero, the one in charge like you always were for so many years. It’s a different world now Albus, and we all have to change with it.”

And that summed it up nicely, Remus was not immune to eloquence after all. Everyone in the know agreed that Dumbledore would have been just fine if he had not tried to hide what he was doing, even the old man himself agreed with that presumption. In many ways, upon later reflection, he thought that losing his job as Headmaster was a light punishment, considering how little The Minister liked him, and what Harry must surely have been saying about him at every opportunity. In fact Harry thought it was the perfect punishment, he was internally rejoicing for Ginny and Luna now, who wouldn’t have to spend two years with a Headmaster who resented their connections.

“Minister, how do you want to handle this? Shall we keep the correspondence going?”

“Well Albus, I see that the most recent date is last week, so we’ll let things shake out a bit more and then revisit your plan, with some adjustments.” Rufus was wondering if Marr’s tracking virus could be secreted somehow on to the note, another point he would discussing with the brilliant Unspeakable. There was one more thing to talk about before they all, save Remus of course, left the castle.

“Albus, I would like to know how you allowed a Dark Slytherin dominated cell of 21 students to exist in this school under your watch.”

Dumbledore now began to fight back.

“You are just as culpable Minister, you could have removed them upon gaining Draco Malfoy’s cooperation, or at least questioned Theodore Nott.”

“This was your school Albus, you should have kept a watch on them, planted some Listening Charms like you did with Harry here.”

“I did, they found them and disabled them, or worked around them, I am not certain. Still, they had done nothing criminal inside this school until today. Being Dark in and of itself is not a crime in our society. As Harry will tell you, you can be Dark and still function within a democracy.”

Harry was willing to admit to no such thing, though it was true in The United States and Canada, where there had not been Dark Wizard uprisings in decades.

“Don’t bring me in as part of your excuses Albus. 21 students is a lot to house under one roof, that alone is enough to justify sacking you as far as I’m concerned. You probably spent more time spying on my friends than you did your enemies. Oh yeah, your 20 minutes today? Forget about it.”

The old man had assumed as much, and didn’t press the point as Harry walked to the door, prepared to leave. That was everyone’s cue, as The Minister motioned for the former Headmaster to get going. Dumbledore collected his things and walked out first, hesitating for a tick, perhaps because he knew that he would likely never see this office again.....or perhaps because he had to pass Harry and was concerned about a Repulsor to the back, or worse, Harry’s promise/bribe reaction notwithstanding.

Everything went smoothly though, and Dumbledore was escorted off the grounds without incident. It was a heady moment for Harry and the twins, the latter two who surreptitiously had Winky hidden with a camera, recording their moment for them. Rufus and Remus did not watch though, as they went back to the new Headmaster’s office for a meeting with McGonagall, one that would be sure to be a lot of fun, though not for Miss Minerva probably. Dumbledore was due at The Ministry in half an hour, after depositing his belongings at Moody’s house, which would be his temporary abode.

Rob Graham was with the WWW three, and appreciated watching the Dumbledore walk of shame. He didn't mind the old man really, his Hogwarts experience had ended eight years earlier and he had fond memories of it, but Rob fully understood the black feeling that these three had for their former Headmaster, and that satisfaction they must be feeling.

"You ready to go Harry? Your people in America are probably on edge a little bit."

"Yeah, let's get it over with. You know you really don't need to come Rob, I can handle Murray on my own."

Graham had no trouble believing this, but orders were orders.

"I know Harry, but The Minister gets what he wants, and I think he feels that you need an unbiased witness, since things seems to happen every time you're over here."

"I'll concede that. Fred, George, we survived again didn't we?" The three shared another of their 'moments', and the twins walked them to the edge of the portkey wards. The twins saw Harry all the time, but again had to pretend here that they didn't, for Rob's benefit.

"We'll be at Great Lakes for breakfast next Saturday, ready to watch the Shawnee Massacre, Part II."

"Just don't start chanting any profanity." Speaking of tough choices:

"Who is Warrick's little cousin going to be cheering for? Family on one side, her House on the other?"

That was a good question, Harry hadn't thought about it like that. Poor Keisha.

But soon the twins were off, and Rob and Harry prepared to start their trip. Harry had a sudden thought first:

“Rob, are you guys thinking about another hit attempt on me? At the portkey stations?” The answer was very disquieting.

“It crossed our minds, yes. The stations are not terribly well secured, have no sign-in procedures, and are an obvious destination point for you after these meetings.” Or so it was believed. The International Confederation staffed and ran the portkey stations, which were little different than muggle highway rest stops.....aside from the notable difference in cleanliness.

“Have I been watched while I was there before?” Keeping up the fiction, plus he was very curious about the answer.

“Only by us, and one time at that. We didn’t see you, your disguise must have been pretty good.”

“I was under my Invisibility Cloak actually.” Said with a straight face, though he didn’t like the idea of lying to his Auror friends. Of course he liked skipping the three hour portkey trip even more. Life was all about choices, Harry kept saying to himself.

After processing that Harry had one of those Cloaks and was deploying it like he claimed, Rob smiled.

“Very clever, you’re not being paranoid if they are really out to get you. C’mon, let’s go.” Harry took out his key, and seconds later they were in Iceland. After about an hour, they were off to Greenland, where Harry dozed the whole time, and then to the final stop in Boston.

Harry and Rob arrived at the Boston portkey station in good order, and from there they flooded to Mike Jacobson’s office, where they filled him in. This was another reason Rob had come, as a government official of sorts. Jacobson was a bit surprised at the orderliness of the aftermath, but Rob and Harry both assured him that this kind of thing happened in magical Britain all the time, so they were used to such cleanups. Mike wasn’t sure whether or not they were kidding, there were smiling after all, but took it as a slight joke, and sent them on their way.

They arrived in Murray's office a bit haggard, but otherwise none the worse for wear. Murray had been in her living quarters, Dobby having not been sent to warn her. She heard the floo fire up, and came out in time to see Rob tumbling out and Harry brushing himself off.

"Well you are still alive, one of these days Dobby is going to play a joke on me."

"He does have a sense of humor, very dry at that. Professor Murray this is Rob Graham, he's one of Travis' guys and is my bodyguard for the journey home." Lil' ole me not being up to the job, Harry managed not to point out, but only so he didn't hurt Rob's feelings.

"Nice to meet you Rob." They shook hands, as Neil Murray popped his head in to see what was going on.

"You okay Harry? Dobby said a couple of cuts?"

"Nothing major Dr. Murray, they didn't even bleed really." One was on his forehead, on the opposite side of his scar, the other being on the right side of his jaw, both from pieces of the wall exploding behind him.

"Glad to hear it." He popped his head back out and returned to the baseball playoff game he was watching, the Murray television set had rabbit ears and could pick up the local stations. Joanne looked him over and confirmed as much, nothing major.

"An assassination attempt eh? Did our friend have anything to do with it?" She didn't exactly sound hopeful, but Harry could tell what she wanted to hear. Harry in fact was glad that Dumbledore had had nothing to do with it. It was one thing for the old man to resent him or for them not to be friends, but Dumbledore as an open, 'I'm going to kill you', enemy was not something Harry needed in his life right at this moment.

"It would seem as though he didn't, wait until you see the stunned expression on his face afterward, I was surprised no one summoned

Madame Pomfrey. Someone his age doesn't need that kind of stress in his life." Rob started chuckling when he heard that, if nothing else he loved listening to Harry insult people.

"So he didn't pull anything at all?"

"Well he might have tried eventually, but the Death Eaters interrupted things."

"I'm sure your Minister will get to the bottom of it. Shall we go to the conference room downstairs? Getting to be kind of a ritual isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, but I'm game. Dobby!"

The wee man popped in.

"Yes Harry?"

"Please get the others and have them meet us downstairs, stress again that I'm perfectly alright."

"Yes Harry." If you say so, Dobby wanted to say but didn't. He was worried about the future impact that all these near death experiences would have on Harry. He resolved to keep a closer eye on his boss until all this business was settled.

Along the way they collected the usual faculty suspects of Lyman, Ziegler, Ripley, and Greenleaf, Heyman having the weekend off from his duties, and they just beat the gang to the conference room. Sophie wasn't running, but she was walking rather quickly as she entered the room. She hugged him, examined him, and then was about to say something when Harry beat her to the punch.

"Hey, Dumbledore didn't do this. So no "I told you so" type things here okay?" That closed her mouth, and Harry gave it a quick kiss.

"So it was the Death Eaters?"

“Some incompetent ones, yes. I’m just fine, and Dumbledore was sacked.”

A classic Harry abrupt segue, he needed some amusement after the rough start to his day, and boy did he get it as jaws dropped around the room. Even Ziegler seemed stunned, and he was normally most unflappable.

“Say that again? I thought you said that he had nothing to do with the attempt on your life?”

“I did Professor Ziegler, and he didn’t. He was having peace talks with Voldemort behind our backs.”

Lyman actually started laughing, until he realized that Harry and Rob were merely smiling; and not joking.

“He was pulling a Chamberlain on you?” Neville Chamberlain was very famous as the British Prime Minister, immediately preceding Winston Churchill, who had tried to appease Hitler into not waging war. To notable failure and the blood of millions, though his intentions were noble.

“Much as it kills me to admit this Josh.....err.....Professor Lyman, but I think he was just seeing if there was a chance. Still, The Minister saw it as a culmination of things, and gave him the sack. Thank God.” Harry was now feeling very comfortable, as he was perfectly safe, and it didn’t look like Sophie was going to have a nutty either. Good times.

“The road to hell was paved with good intentions wasn’t it? Were you to be sacrificed as part of the deal?”

“Nah, Tom just wanted my exile to be official and permanent. I read the notes, so you can see them via pensieve.” He then had Dobby fetch his pensieve, and put on the show, starting on the walk back from the Quidditch game, which Harry merely described for a couple of minutes. Even Rob hadn’t seen most of it, at least the stuff in Dumbledore’s office the second time. It played how Harry figured it

would, the faculty were more relieved than anything, with his friends again marveling that not only did Hogwarts seem so dangerous, but also that that dangerousness didn't seem to cause more concern than it did. They liked Rufus getting angry though, they had not seen him that way in July at all.

The memory played for quite awhile, there was no easy fast forward in a pensieve, and despite all of his replays over the last year and change, Harry still wasn't too deft with it. Sophie looked relieved when she saw that the Killing Curses never got within a foot of her boyfriend, and Harry's 'example' of Theo Nott was smiled at by pretty much everyone, even Claudia, who generally disapproved of such things. She had one salient point to make though:

"It'll be hard to question him without his teeth you know."

"They'll manage Claudia thank you very much, they are professionals you know. Besides, he has other parts of his body to worry about. I wonder if they have potions to grow those little bits?" They did, not that Nott would be offered any. Warrick grimaced at the thought.

"I say the bastard got off light, but please don't ever get mad at me Harry."

"Well don't try to kill me Warrick and you'll be just fine."

"That's easy enough. So a Lycan as Headmaster? How is your general public there not going to go crazy?"

Harry had a hard time believing it himself, with only Rufus' assurances that the public would acknowledge Remus as 'the exception', as The Minister put it.

"I have a theory, one that I hope Rob will back me up on: I'm betting that most of the families that would have pulled their kids out of school have just had said kids arrested for being part of Theo's spy ring." Everyone looked at Rob, and the 26 year old Auror mulled it over for a tick.

“That’s not a bad theory, I can see it happening just like that. It all depends on how things go with the questioning this weekend. If there’s more to come in the arrest category? But I agree that Remus will be fine there, the faculty will all cooperate, even McGonagall. Hearing that Dumbledore was going behind our backs talking to Voldemort really rocked her.” That encouraged the students, all of whom at least felt sorry for Remus, even if the faculty was still incredulous that a Lycan could be put in charge of a magical school, however loyal he appeared to be. Sophie managed to say something for the first time since the beginning.

“What will you do now that Sarah will be at Hogwarts? Will you lead the crew?”

“I doubt it, the unofficial rule is that you have to be 27 or 28 for them to really consider it, though they prefer at least 10 years as a full Auror. Sarah had just turned 30 when Travis got promoted, and that was pretty young. I think Travis was 26, but it helped that the guy he was replacing as crew leader, Rufus, was just made Head Auror. No, Edgar and I will either go on bodyguard duty with The Minister, my preference, or Travis will shake things up and give us a new crew leader.” It would turn out to be the former, as Travis had been quietly singing Rob’s praises for months now, with the tutoring feedback doing the large man no harm either.

The group picked over Dumbledore, yet again, and speculated on what he might be up to. Rob, who was rather enjoying being the expert on this kind of thing for once, gave his theory.

“I think he’ll behave himself now, all it would take is one note from Rufus to McCrae about Dumbledore’s dealings and he would be finished.”

“But didn’t that happen a couple of years ago with Fudge?”

After Rob stopped chuckling, he answered Harry’s question

“Fudge could barely find his office on his better days, let alone get dirt dug up on Dumbledore. And Fudge didn’t want people who were too much smarter than he was nearby, or if they were smarter they had to be bootlickers like Percy, God rest his soul.” He added that last little bit for Harry’s benefit.

“So Rufus has more blackmail over Dumbledore than what he’s used so far?”

“He can have him removed from the rest of his offices with about 10 minutes worth of effort. No Harry, the old man has been brought to heel, finally. He doesn’t dare breathe wrong now, knowing how much scrutiny he’s under. Look guys, I know that all of this seems very political at times, and maybe it is, I often wonder if Rufus and Bones have visited the muggle House of Commons too many times. But our society over there is a fractious one, and while I never really had a problem with Dumbledore, a lot of it is his fault now that I look at it. He should have been Minister years ago, he’s that intelligent and that powerful, and if he had? I wonder if Voldemort would ever have risen at all beyond a nuisance, I’m talking about before Harry’s parents were murdered. But instead we were stuck with McLaws, Bagnold, and Fudge, and a lot of Quaffles were dropped a lot of times. Rufus has a lot of ground to make up, but he’s getting there. We’re getting there.” He tried to sound as sure of that as he could, and it succeeded for the most part.

After a little more talk, Rob was off on the journey back. He seemed to imply to Harry that he would be meeting him along the portkey way every month, which Harry took very calmly while the older man was still there, but later raged at losing all that sleep. He and Sophie journeyed back to the trunk while he got changed for Quidditch practice. Once they got there:

“Sophie, would you please wig out now, all this waiting is putting me on edge.” He was sort of smiling as he said this, but she took his words seriously.

“I’m not going to wig out.”

“Why not!? I was almost killed you know!” He was laughing though, after he said that.

“Sure you were Harry, there was at least a foot of clearance. A couple of those shots were closer to Travis than they were to you.” This was true, and now she was the one smiling.

“Yeah, I guess so.” He pretended to be grumpy for a second, and Sophie took his hands in hers.

“Look Harry, you did everything you could to minimize the danger, and having Dobby and Winky go on patrol was your idea, and it made the difference. You were brilliant as you always are in these situations. The only complaint I have is this: What was Ron thinking during that game? All he did was get Malfoy’s attention when he yelled like that.”

Harry had not mentioned this while at Hogwarts, as Ron had been glowing a bit from his shutout, the loss notwithstanding. He knew that Ron, despite how well they were currently getting along, did not want any input from him on Quidditch matters. Maybe he would say something through Ginny, who didn’t much care what Ron thought of her opinions.

“I think he’ll know not to do it against Hufflepuff next time, I hope. It was weird watching them play like that, and not being in the game.”

“Didn’t you watch during your suspension?”

“I did for the first game, but I was keeping too close an eye on Umbridge to really watch the game or enjoy it. The second game I was busy hunting for Grawp.” He often wondered how Ron ever forgave Hermione for missing that game, though he had a few hunches. The big one was that Ron not bitching too much about it during that summer had led to Hermione finally thinking he was ready for a relationship. Just a theory, but it was the one that Harry went with.

“Whatever happened to him?” Grawp she meant.

“He’s somewhere in the Highlands, or so Arthur told me one time. I guess the Centaurs raised such a stink with Dumbledore that he had Grawp moved.” This had been the previous November, after a third Bane-led attack on the giant had finally brought things to a head.

She soon brought the conversation back to where it started.

“Are you really okay?”

“I’m fine Sophie, I was more worried about your reaction than anything.”

“You really thought I’d say I told you so?” She sounded a bit hurt.

“I wouldn’t have blamed you really.” That brought her up short a little, as the roles suddenly reversed.

“Why not?”

“Because it shows that you care, and that you’re worried.”

“It’s a fine line isn’t it though? Between being the concerned girlfriend and a paranoid harpy.”

“Sophie, one of the definite things I need in life is someone who will tell it to me straight, and make sure that I’m not too reckless with my life and with others. I sure as anything can’t rely on the twins to do it, so you get the gig by default, and by yourself to boot.”

“I thought Arthur had taken that on?” She giggled at the expression on Harry’s face after she said that.

“I think Arthur should have paid a bit more attention to Percy when he could have, and the twins too, but Percy especially. Maybe the guy wouldn’t have turned out so.....and I know this is rich coming from me, but he turned out so weird, so unlike everyone else in that family. I love the guy, don’t get me wrong, but I’ll never see him as a father figure type, particularly after he only took the job on in the last

year or so.” In truth Molly was more to blame for Percy, since she never tried to set him straight no matter how obnoxious he got, indulging him because of how different he was from Charlie and the twins.

That was interesting for Sophie to hear, and was interested in exploring it more, but her man had to get going to practice. Only this one and one more before the pivotal game with Shawnee.

Okay, before the expected rout against Shawnee, who had lost most of their best players aside from their Keeper. Warrick came to collect him and they were off.

Meanwhile, at The Ministry, Rufus and Travis had both returned, meeting Bones. She had been supervising the interrogations, they were doing three students at a time, and so far no other weeds in the Hogwarts garden had been discovered.

“Has Dumbledore arrived yet Amelia?”

“He has, he’s waiting in my office. Is he really rolling over for this?” She still found it difficult to believe, even as Rufus, McCrae, and Harry had all battered him down over the last couple of years, that Dumbledore would just surrender.

“So it would seem. He never would have come here if he couldn’t pass trial by Veritaserum. But I have a different plan in mind first. Did you separate out the female assassin as I asked?” Well, ordered.

“I did, and Marr put the tracker in her about 15 minutes ago.”

“Good, go get her and bring her to my office, I have some instructions for her. Travis, go get Redgrave and bring him to my office as well.” Steven Redgrave was the Head Obliviator.

“You got it.” The two of them left, and Rufus sat back in his chair, somewhat exhausted. The day’s events had worn on him a little bit, even as they had been largely a success. Rufus was only in his 50’s, but he had led a very full life so far.....but further reflection was

interrupted by Travis and Redgrave coming in, soon followed by Bones and the prisoner, one Karla Fricke, a 26 year old Death Eater of limited magical ability, but one who followed orders very well and agreed with the Death Eater agenda. She was tightly bound in magical ropes, but looked very nervous being brought in here, even more so after she saw Rufus and Travis.

Rufus turned to Redgrave:

“Steven, I am about to perform Imperious on this woman, after which I would like you to remove everything that has happened to her since her initial arrest.”

“Yes Minister.” Redgrave and Rufus were old friends, having graduated Hogwarts at the same time, there was nothing he wouldn’t do for The Minister.

Rufus turned to Fricke, wand raised.

“Imperious!”

Her expression soon turned blank, not unlike if she had taken Veritaserum, which she had not today, the only one of the assassins who would not be seriously questioned. And here was why:.

“You will be set free in a few minutes in Knockturn Alley, after which you will be policed up by your Death Eater friends. When you get back to your Headquarters, you will kill Bellatrix Black by any means necessary, even if it means you die in the attempt.” He took the wand off, and signaled for Redgrave to do his business, while he took a white faced Bones and a grim faced Travis out in the deserted hallway.

“I don’t want to hear it Amelia. That man snuck six assassins into a school to take out one 17 year old kid, however powerful that kid is. I think he needs a taste of his own medicine. We have all heard rumors of Voldemort and the former Mrs. Lestranger, and I believe them. Let’s hit him where it might hurt, and send a message that if he wants to

play, we can accommodate him.” Needless to say, this tactic was not well received by his DMLE Head.

“We’re sinking to his level. Let the tracker do the work, and get ready to stage a raid on Parrish’s complex in Bodo. That will hurt him, adding to the damage we have already done over the last year.” Bones was no appeaser, but in a lot of ways she was the conscience of this administration. Rufus respected her for that, and that’s why he even bothered discussing it.

“I’m going to do that last part too, and my feeling is that they will check her for any Tracking Charms and the like. We will finally get a good test of Marr’s virus.” Dumbledore was their unknowing beta tester, but Voldemort was presumably more thorough and would check a bit harder.

“I don’t like this Minister, this is something.....it doesn’t seem right.”

Surprisingly, it was Travis who responded.

“Amelia, eventually Voldemort is going to get Harry, if he keeps trying hard enough. No one is lucky or good enough to keep dodging death the way Harry has been able to these last six years. We need to remind our man Voldemort that terrorism has it’s price, that he can’t do this with impunity. And most importantly, that Hogwarts is off limits.” Not anymore probably, after all his sympathizers had been removed from the line of fire, but they would consider the implications of that a little later on.

“And if he goes after Harry at Great Lakes?”

“I’ve seen the wards there Amelia, and if two dozen werewolves with missiles couldn’t do much, I doubt Voldemort can, and the werewolves had a pair of leaders who had attended the school. Besides, I wouldn’t want to be the Death Eater that Harry catches. Sooner or later his resentment of all this is going to boil over and it’s going to be a sight to see.” He was smiling when he said this, and that horrified Bones all the more.

“And how is that good? All that does is put Dumbledore’s half baked theories into play. We don’t need Potter turning any nastier than he already is. It’s one thing for you to rough up a Death Eater Travis, you’re 35 years old with a wealth of life experience. He’s 17 years old, as you pointed out Minister, at some point the psychological damage is going to start to become irreversible.” And she knew that Rufus and Biller would do nothing but egg Harry on, and assist him whenever possible.....they knew a kindred spirit when they saw one.

“Amelia, don’t think that that hasn’t occurred to The Minister and I, because it has.” Biller then told her about Harry’s ‘he’s going to wait until I graduate’ theory.

“Come June of next year we’re going to have a final battle Amelia, the rest of this is just waiting.”

“Then what was today about?”

“Who can say, but you’ll notice that no high level Death Eaters entered the castle, even Gibbon was over a kilometer away and was not supposed to get caught. Voldemort was just trying to get Harry to go nuts and kill Dumbledore for him, which would at least start a civil war on our side, and at most get Harry arrested. Now Harry arrested and put in Azkaban? That guarantees a breakout attempt, and puts Harry squarely on Voldemort’s side in gratitude. Then Harry and Voldemort both come after us, and the lot of us will be dead inside a week. Harry’s planning ability is all Voldemort needs to come out on top. Harry’s not especially greedy, so the bad man will know that his spot on the throne will be safe.”

Rufus and Bones just stared at Travis, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. Travis was certainly no dummy, he had graduated at the top of his Hogwarts class after all, but this was some heretofore unshown political acumen. Rufus was mentally chuckling that Amos Diggory didn’t have this kind of mind, yet Rufus’ Head Auror and closest friend did.

“You’ve clearly thought this through Travis, haven’t you?”

“I’ve been thinking about it since we made the tutoring deal with Harry, since you officially formed your alliance with him Rufus. That alliance forces us to deal with Harry and Dumbledore and their difficulties more than it would have otherwise, and you both know it.”

“Yes, and another curse was dodged today. I don’t think we have anything to fear on that front anymore though, with Dumbledore out of the school and away from Harry’s friends. Now their lives need not touch until the final battle you alluded to, aside from League meetings.”

“Was that one of the reasons you had him sacked?”

“Yes it was Amelia, though I needed a flashpoint in order to get it done. Come along, let’s get our interrogation of Dumbledore up and running, I want all three of us in there. Then we’ll have Flint help us question Gibbon, he needs to earn his freedom before we give it to him.” Right after he said that, Redgrave exited Rufus’ office.

“It’s done sir, I kept the memory of her arrest in there, but planted a vision of her escaping in transit. It’s a bit fuzzy, but she believes it. She’s ready to be placed where you need her to be.” No one did this kind of thing better than Redgrave, one of the relatively few people in The Ministry who had earned Department Head status strictly on merit alone. Redgrave had been in his current job for over 20 years, Rufus being his fifth Minister. Only Patrick Cleburne had been a Department Head longer than he had.

“Excellent Steven, you do beautiful work. Travis, have Kingsley and his people do the planting, let him make amends for allowing Bane and his friend to come into the castle uninvited. Don’t tell him anything other than that she should be put in Knockturn in a fairly obvious place.” The last thing they needed was Dumbledore getting a 22nd wind and deciding to resume his meddling.

“Got it.” Travis went into the office, and used Mobilicorpus to haul Fricke over to the main duty room, where Kingsley and his two people

were made aware of the operation. Before they left, Travis had one last salient point to make to his subordinate.

“Don’t screw this up Kingsley.” Not that there was much to screw up really.

“I won’t Travis. Look, I have to ask, what did Dumbledore really do to get sacked?” He, like pretty much every adult and most of the older kids present at the announcement, did not buy it for a second.

Biller saw a potential opening here, and went after it.

“Ask him, see if he gives you a straight answer, you being one of his Order people. Come back and tell me what it is, and we’ll compare notes. There’s still time for you Kingsley, there’s still time for you to show where your loyalties are. Ask him.” With that, Travis sent the three Aurors and their prisoner on their way, while he went to help question Dumbledore..

Dumbledore passed his Veritaserum test with flying colors. It turned out that he did not have any plans for Harry as far as Hogwarts went, he simply wanted to have his erstwhile foe visit his old stomping grounds and see his friends play their Quidditch game. It was all a part of Dumbledore’s détente strategy, and an exasperated Travis asked him why the hell he didn’t just make that plain to everyone and avoid all the tension.

“Would you have believed me? Would Harry have believe it at all? I don’t think so Travis.” And all three interrogators had to candidly admit that he was right.

The interrogation lasted just 20 minutes, all that was allowed under Veritaserum, with an eight hour rest period being mandated between bouts of the drug. Rufus had long had a series of questions prepared, hoping for something like to have happened. Other nuggets gleaned from it included:

The Order of the Phoenix was currently at 53 members, which included the reluctant membership of Arthur, Molly, Bill, and the twins,

the latter two of whom never attended meetings any longer but were available in a pinch. Dumbledore said that he had resisted temptation to try and expand the memberships due to security concerns.

There were seven members of Auror Command who moonlit as Order members, something that was frowned upon but not specifically outlawed. Yet. Not that any of them told the old man this. None of the Aurors besides Kingsley were crew leaders, nor were any Department Heads, save Arthur, members of the Order either.

Harry was indeed Dumbledore's primary heir, and a trust fund of 10 million galleons had been established in Harry's name many years ago, he was eligible to gain access to it once he reached 25 years old or had his first child in wedlock, whichever happened first. The remainder of the estate would go to him upon Dumbledore's death. Harry was to find all of this out after he graduated from wherever he was to graduate from, the Great Lakes move did not change a thing in that regard.

Moody knew everything that Dumbledore knew about The Order, and was the designated successor if something should happen to necessitate a successor.

Dumbledore's own preferred successor as Headmaster was Flitwick, not McGonagall and certainly not Remus. He told them that McGonagall was simply too unforgiving and hard with the students, while Flitwick was the most popular teacher Hogwarts had ever had.

The old man currently had no surveillance on Harry at Great Lakes or in Flackter Alley, though he had tried to sneak Tonks in there, before knowing about her Wizard's Oath to support Harry against such things. He informed them that Tonks had been not what one could call willing to do the spying, but she had never flat out said no until she brought up the Oath.

There were other odds and ends that at least one of the three interrogators found interesting, but nothing major. Rufus walked Dumbledore out, with this last salvo.

“Albus, I want you here Monday morning at 10:00 for your next, and hopefully last session under Veritaserum. It will be mostly detail gathering in nature, and our questions will incorporate information that we glean today and tomorrow.”

“I will be here Minister, I intend to establish an office here, per my Wizengamot duties.”

Rufus loved this idea, there were several experimental Surveillance Charms that he itching to try out, and this would be the perfect testing ground. Ironically, Dumbledore wanted no part of using Grimmauld Place as an office, assuming that either Harry would have planted some Surveillance Charms, or booby traps, or that he would have asked Remus to. He apparently did not reckon on the Unspeakables though.

“Glad to hear it, I will let you know if anything major develops from our interrogations.”

“Thank you Minister. Good day.” He walked out as quickly as his dignity would allow him to. Bones followed him, wanting a word about a pending Wizengamot matter. Travis and Rufus, both whipped from the day’s events, nevertheless went to join the interrogations of the Hogwarts students.....well, ex-students as it was a mere formality and a lot of Remus Lupin signatures before they were officially booted out. They shot off a quick note to Harry, via the shop, about the results of the Dumbledore questioning, and the young man was very pleased, yet somewhat creeped out by the knowledge that he was getting yet more money from the man who had denied him a childhood.

He managed to avoid asking Sophie to quickly marry him and conceive their first child right away though, Harry was a gentleman. And he was already rich, so he could wait eight years if necessary. Warrick might not have been so gentlemanly, Jonas neither.

Meanwhile, in Knockturn Alley:

Karla Fricke had been placed, untied of course, right outside Borgin and Burkes. Kingsley and his crew were wearing shabby clothing and were in and out before anyone really noticed them. Fricke had a timed Disillusionment Charm on her that evaporated five minutes after the Aurors had left, and soon her moans attracted some attention from inside the shop. Borgin himself came out, and while he didn't recognize the low-level Death Eater lying outside his shop, a cursory physical examination revealed the tattoo that confirmed her as a kindred spirit.

Borgin was Voldemort's inside man in Knockturn Alley, though he was not part of Lucius Malfoy's former intelligence network that had been rolled up the previous year. This would account for why Borgin was working this day rather than rotting in Azkaban, which was now about to be at near full capacity. Borgin had mirror communication with Pettigrew, and soon enough the rat and Nott were in the shop, examining Fricke, who was roused with a simple Pepper-Up Potion, though she still complained of a headache.....it turned out that she had slammed her head on the ground in the Great Hall so hard that her skull was cracked. Not that anyone else present really cared, nor had Rufus or Travis done any kind of detailed medical examination while they had her in custody.

"Karla, what happened? Where are the others?"

"I don't remember, I just know that we didn't get Potter, I don't think."

"Did anyone else get out?"

"I don't think so, I managed to find a hole in the anti-Apparition wards and I took it. I don't know what happened to the others." Yeah, not really, but that's the story that Redgrave planted in her, and it was working like a charm.

"But Potter survived?"

"He was tipped off somehow, the Killing Curses never got close to him."

Pettigrew stayed silent for a moment, raging that his big plan had tanked. Wormtail, like most Death Eaters, didn't think Potter could be killed by Avada Kedavra, but he at least wanted to find out one way or the other. Now he would have to find another way, assuming that Voldemort would let him after this fiasco. While he pondered this, Nott took over questioning of a more groggy by the second Fricke.

“Was there any fighting beyond your Killing Curses?”

“Not unless you count their Stunners.” She then collapsed on the ground and Nott finally did a medical scan.

“She's got a fractured skull, if we don't get some potions in her quickly she's going to die.” Again, it should be stressed that they only cared about Fricke's physical well-being in that they needed to question her. Borgin had a few such potions on hand, and Fricke was quickly forced to gulp them down. This reduced the swelling on her brain, and allowed them to safely transport her back to Island 12 in The Orkneys.

Any muggle hearing or reading that name would have no idea what that meant, which was just as well since Island 12 had been under some kind of Fidelius or Unplottable status for over 400 years, owned by the Nott family, and while it appeared on some very old muggle maps, no one could get to it.

She was revived and brought in front of Voldemort, who ordered Parrish to use whatever potions needed to patch her up. The bad man did a cursory invasion of her mind, but found that her brain was just too fragile to be tampered with at present. The Death Eaters had finally recruited a doctor, one Phineas Nixon, but he was off doing an errand for the bad man, no one thinking that any of the attackers would be returning at all, save Gibbon, let alone with any injuries. Nixon returned later in the evening and immediately induced a coma on Fricke, her injuries were very similar to those of Lucius Malfoy. Lucius' injuries had taken over a month to heal, though his were more dramatic in nature and he was not in as good a shape as Fricke. She

would wake up in two weeks time, and was moved back to Parrish's headquarters in Norway, just in case.

When none of the other Death Eaters turned up, it was assumed that they were in Ministry hands and were now making full confessions. The worry was Gibbon, as he had more access to internal Death Eater matters than your average bear, and should not have been near the castle in any case. When he didn't turn up after a day, Pettigrew was sent to investigate, his rat form allowing for easier evasion. His report was brief and to the point:

"Master, I investigated the part of the forest where our people would have congregated. There was dried blood on the ground, quite a lot of it. I took some samples back to Parrish and he confirmed it as Gibbon's blood, we have samples from all of our people just in case something like this happens. There was no indication of whether or not he was killed, and there was no brain matter or body parts on the ground at all. Obviously there was no body laying there, and I could not detect how they removed him, or even who removed him."

"The Centaurs perhaps?" The bad man doubted that the Aurors or the League would go so far as to patrol the Forbidden Forest during a Quidditch game, but it was certainly possible.

"That is my feeling Master, that they came upon him in the forest and attacked him. Whether they still have him or not is uncertain, I rather doubt that they would just hand him over to The Ministry." It was a stretch, however wrong he turned out to be.

"Bella, get a force ready to go in there and retrieve Gibbon. Don't go until I give the order though, I want to wait and see if our Auror friends have him, along with the others.

"Yes Master. What about the others? Do we go get them?"

"Let's see how many there are first. If they have Gibbon, then they will have Frederick's son in custody too, and then all of the students that Theodore runs."

This was where Rufus' draconian sweep of The Ministry was really hurting Voldemort and his operations, as they no longer had an inside person with the government. They did still have a rather high ranking person at Gringott's, and Nott was dispatched to the bank to glean what he could, the Gringotts goblins seemed to know everything that went on anywhere.

They would not have to wait very long for official word, as The Daily Prophet the next day had three pages devoted to Quidditch, and the other 21 devoted to the events at Hogwarts.

Sunday, October 5, 1997

Magical Great Britain

Mid-day

The reaction to the resignation/sacking of Dumbledore was massive, and the headline of The Daily Prophet took up the entire top section of the paper: Though to be fair, the front page of the paper was nothing but three headlines The first:

Dumbledore Resigns! Under Pressure?

The series of articles was basically a Dumbledore retrospective for the most part, with five different Daily Prophet writers taking their turn. All of them speculated on the real reasons that the old man called it quits, and.....well let's just say that speculation was the order of the day, no pun intended, with these pieces. Dumbledore himself was liberally quoted in the articles, and gave nothing that would cause Rufus to have another go at him. None of the articles flat out said that Dumbledore had been sacked, but all implied that Rufus did more than nudge him out the door.

Harry was 'unavailable for comment' as he always was, though the assassination attempts were the second headline:

Boy Who Lived Escapes Death Yet Again!

McCrae wrote one of the articles, and was probably as complimentary in print as he had been toward Harry in quite the long while. Their Boxing Day lunch wouldn't be cancelled over this coverage, that was for sure. The main story stressed that Harry was in no real danger, and that all involved had been taken into custody. And all involved meant the Death Eaters, though no names were given, as well as the students, whose names were in fact given. It was quite the roster, and the non-Slytherin families with children at Hogwarts were all astounded upon reading that their children had been in a lot greater danger than any of them had thought.

The third headline, at the bottom, was as one might guess:

Remus Lupin Assumes Headmaster Duties at Hogwarts!

The main article was an exact transcription of McCrae's 15 minutes with Remus, with no editing and analysis only at the end. Remus came off as surprised, but full of ideas and enthusiasm for the job. There was one article that examined the potential of a werewolf running a school, but the writer, our very own Alicia Spinnet, came to the conclusion that there was no more risk for Remus being Headmaster than there was in him being Defense teacher.....and really a little less, since he would not be in hourly contact with the students in his new position. Alicia had been given a little more time with Remus, due to her connections, and the twins and Bill were very liberally quoted in the article as well, full of praise for their friend.

It was a surprising take on the events of the day, all in all, as The Daily Prophet turned out mostly positive coverage for Harry and Remus, and neutral at best toward Dumbledore. McCrae was a realist, and saw how the tide was turning. Cousin to the now dead Lestrangle brothers he might be, he knew a winning side when he saw one. That and Rufus really had threatened him.

The reaction from the parents was a little more mixed. No one removed their child from school, yet, as Harry's theory played out as he thought it would. Many parents did visit the school however, or at least demanded entrance at the front door, as the school was in lockdown for the entire day. No one was let in until the all clear was given by Rufus and The Ministry, which finally happened at 3:00 pm

when Rufus himself came to the castle. He addressed the parents, numbering around three dozen or so, and did his best to calm them down.

“Headmaster Lupin will do an excellent job and he has my full confidence. Yes, his Lycanthropy was a consideration, but he has over two years teaching at Hogwarts already, and there have been no incidents.” No incidents that he chose to share with them actually. Harry had given him full details of the night over three years earlier when Pettigrew had escaped and Remus had been loose in the Forbidden Forest. But the general public was unaware of this, and Rufus had remembered to threaten Dumbledore and McGonagall about sharing it. He was nothing if not thorough.

“What if he changes and attacks a student?”

“He has had thousands of opportunities to do so already, yet he has not. I’m confident that this will remain so.”

“Easy for you to say, you don’t have any children!”

“Yet it will be my head that rolls if something does happen. It will not.” That was as close as he would get to guaranteeing Remus, and it was pretty effective. Not that it stopped the flow of questions.

“Why not one of the more experienced teachers?”

Remus was standing right next to Rufus and Bones, and was rather bemused at the parents talking about him as if he was not right there in front of them. He let Rufus handle this one though, as he was just as interested in the answer:

“Experienced in what? None of them, save Professor McGonagall, have experience running a school, and it was felt that she was not the best long-term candidate for the position. We feel that Remus is, and I fully expect him to earn the job on a more permanent basis.” No one seemed to have a problem with that line of reasoning, as while McGonagall was respected by the magical public, that’s about all she was, there was little warmth for her among the general population. In

the eyes of many she was simply Mrs. Snape, the only exception being that she punished her own House as well as the other three.....a bit too much according to most Gryffindor alumni, though everyone would acknowledge her abilities as an instructor.

“Was any attempt made to talk Dumbledore out of retiring?”

“No there was not, as I happen to agree with his reasoning for resigning. With Dumbledore fighting the war and Remus educating the students, we have the best of both worlds here, and I would be a fool not to take advantage of it.” He managed to say all of that with a straight face, at least he meant the Remus part of it truthfully. Again, more steam was taken out of the crowd, which was smaller than Remus had feared it would be anyway. The rest of the Q&A dealt with process issues, and what Remus would change. It wouldn't be a whole lot, at least not right away.

“During the Christmas Break the faculty and I will sit down and come up with a plan of what we would like to see changed and what needs no changing at all. I welcome all input and will be soliciting ideas from The Ministry and prominent alumni, as well as our current Prefects.” The words 'prominent alumni' was vague enough that it could be laid on quite a few people, including the current crowd. Everyone assembled also assumed that the WWW three, who were not alumni, would be consulted as well. Which was wrong at the beginning, as Remus would become somewhat sensitive to the perception that he was subordinate of The Boy Who Lived, fearing that it would undermine his rather tenuous authority. Rufus was one thing, he was The Minister of Magic. Harry was another kettle of fish altogether. Speak of the devil:

“Is this enough to get Harry Potter back to Hogwarts?” It should be noted that the asker was a parent with a pair of Gryffindor kids, a Third Year and a Sixth Year, and was mainly worried about her old House's Quidditch prospects.

Remus knew that he dare not hesitate answering this one.

“Harry Potter is a good friend of mine, but I will not attempt to interfere with his education in America. Hogwarts is always open to him if he wishes to return, but I do not anticipate this happening.” He hoped this would be enough to satisfy both the crowd, and a sure to hear about it within hours Harry.

It was, and after a few more questions the crowd began to dissipate. Remus and Rufus repaired back to Remus’ new office, which he had swept five times since dinnertime last night, but had found nothing left behind of the magical variety.

“Are any more students to be detained?”

“No, apparently Theo Nott was the hub and knew everyone involved. It was the first thing we asked all of them, if there were any others in the spy ring, but they were it.”

“Do you have the expulsion papers for me to sign?”

“Not yet, they need to be convicted first, right now they are just suspended pending their trials. The trials will be the week after this one, while they are all open and shut cases, it’s still a lot of paperwork to deal with, hence the delay. After they are all convicted, then the expulsion papers will be delivered for you for your signatures.”

“I can’t believe there are so many, and so few in Slytherin comparatively. I would have thought that they would all be in that House.”

“So did I, but Theo said that his life wouldn’t be worth a rusty Knut if the old man slipped any spies in amongst his people, so he vetted them very carefully. I gather that there was a lot of Obliviation involved, for unwilling recruits as well, but we haven’t gotten that far yet.” There had been three sessions with Theo so far, with two more to go. There was no immunity agreement though, Theo Nott would be housed in Azkaban before and after his trial. Rufus intended to put him next to Umbridge, just for the hell of it.

“And Gibbon?”

“Oh we’ve just begun harvesting that crop Remus. First we had to debrief Flint, and he’s going to help us with Gibbon, before his unfortunate escape to parts unknown.” Parts unknown would be the Azores, where Dmitri Flint ran a bank that specialized in money laundering, among other unsavory business practices. The elder Flint was not a Death Eater, but he did favors for the bad man from time to time. Not any longer though, not after Voldemort had sent Marcus on a suicide mission to kill someone who probably couldn’t be killed.

“It sounds like we will both be busy men for the immediate future.”

“I don’t mind at all, I haven’t had this much fun in weeks. How is Miss Minerva handling things?”

“She’s still pretty pissed, but so far nothing has been said out loud.” He could tell that she was fighting it though, in the pair of meetings that they had had since, and that there was to be a reckoning soon. He would start dropping hints to Sinistra about perhaps expanding her duties, she had the lightest non-Divination load among the teachers anyway.

“Would you like me to place some Charms in her quarters?” McGonagall lived at school, having no family. Remus’ reply astonished The Minister.

“I already did last night. The twins worked up a version of that Ventriloquist Sponge idea of theirs that records a lot more dialogue. I had several placed in her rooms while she was at dinner. They should defeat a random scan, according to our mayhem experts.” These versions were not available to the general public of course, they were only for special customers. Marie had already bought \$200 worth, and her purchasing rival Rachel Kessler had bought a like amount. All for projects unknown.

“I’m very impressed, very impressed. With both you and them by the way, if McGonagall, Hagrid, and Flitwick are going to plot something,

you'll soon know. I'll have to order some for myself." For professional use only of course.

"Just stop by the shop and get some, Fred told me that they just put the finishing touches on them this past week. They probably would have told you about them if yesterday had been normal."

"Good point. Is there anything else that you need here?"

"What do you think of the idea of having no spectators at the game next week? We can have the students in the Great Hall and pipe in Doyle's match commentary."

Rufus liked that idea a lot, this promotion was already paying off as far as he was concerned, as he and Remus seemed to think alike on a few things more than he had anticipated. There was one problem though:

"As good an idea as that is, it would send the wrong message to our friends and our enemies. No Remus, Auror and League security will be enough, even without Harry and the twins."

"Harry took that so calmly yesterday, aside from his Nott demonstration. It's like he expected it to happen."

"He was expecting something, but from your predecessor. Which he wasn't going to get by the way, or so the questioning revealed. No Remus, our young friend has simply become desensitized to violence, like a muggle child who watches the news everyday. Once this war is over, he can rebound."

"I hope you're right."

Rufus got up as if to leave.

"I hope I am too. You know, I'm surprised you haven't asked the question yet."

"What question? The 'Why did you pick me?' question?"

“The very one.”

“I assumed that you would tell me when you wanted to.”

“It was not just a middle finger to the pureblood crowd Remus, or a way to bother McGonagall, though those are pleasant bonuses.”

“Then why?”

“You mean besides that I firmly believe that you will do a great job?”

“I’m fine with just hearing that, but I assume there is more.” There was.

“To send a message to any wavering Death Eater that I can be dealt with, and that I can be inclusive. They’ll look at you, now arguably the second most influential person in our society, and know that they have a place with us, if they will only let their conscience be their guide. At the very least we should slow down their recruitment.”

“At what point does Voldemort start a terror campaign?”

“I don’t know Remus, it all depends on when he decides that he is losing I suppose.”

Rufus left a few minutes later, and Remus went off to find Sinistra.

Meanwhile, later in the day at Great Lakes, it was Carpel Tunnel Day, as all eight gang members spent the entire afternoon filling out forms and typing up writing samples. It was college application time, and the forms had to be delivered to Murray in the morning so that she could add the teacher recommendations and other school things, after which they would be mailed to the gang’s 10 school list. Marie had not had a vote on the list, it was done before she got to Wales in July, but she liked enough of the schools on it that she was game to find out. She too liked the idea of warm weather after seven years of Winter blizzards.

Harry dutifully made copies of the applications for Hermione, and added a note that he would buy her a typewriter if she needed one, as the writing samples could not be handwritten. He also had Dobby prepare the twins for the Howler they were going to get once Ron found out about all this, as he couldn't get any himself. Dobby did have one good point.

"When am I supposed to give her these Harry? The two of them are always together and I would not feel right popping into a girl's room like that." Though under the impression that the little guy did that all the time, Harry didn't argue.

"Good question.....give them to Ginny and have her slip them to Hermione somehow. She's sort of devious, she'll know what to do."

That seemed to satisfy Dobby, and he was quickly away with the folder full of applications. Everyone wound up popping at least one dose of Tylenol to relieve cramped hands, but the process was done before dinner. As they were policing up their materials in the trunk, Harry took a look around.

"This was one weird weekend you know, all the excitement yesterday, and today I spend all day scribbling and typing. I swear the dichotomy of my life is just perverse."

"Maybe we should revisit that book series about your life?" Sophie loved reminding him of that at times like these.

"Feel free, but I want half the profits."

"We'll see if I need a job after college, then we'll talk profit sharing."

"I'll just make sure to buy all the copies of your books, just in case."

"Spoilsport."

"Yet you love me anyway."

“Somehow.”

The applications went off on Tuesday, winging their way toward the various universities as Harry especially started wondering what a normal life would be like after the war was over. Now more than ever, he was wedded to the idea of living in The United States after university. The only positive about all of this business is that now it appeared that McCrae was off his back for the time being. The ensuing week was drama free, as Harry was allowed by fate to settle back into his class routine. All he had to do now was look forward to Quidditch weekend.

Saturday, October 11, 1997

Great Lakes Athletic Field

10:00 am

The Cortez team was waiting by the entrance, ready to be announced first, as the defending champions. Warrick looked over his team and saw them confident and ready, they could not have picked a better opponent than Shawnee for that. He took his cousin aside.

“You ready Marty?”

“Is your head bald?” Always the appearance of confidence, though the Novice was a bit tense.

“Good, now don’t make me look like a nepotistic fool for putting you on this team. You earned it, now you have to show it.”

“I won’t let you down cuz, you know that.” Marty appreciated the ‘you earned it’ part. As much as he ripped on his older cousin, he did really like the guy.

“Good, now it’s okay to be nervous. Heck, it’s okay to play nervous for the first few minutes even. Just remember to target their Chasers every chance you get. And seeing as how this is your first game and

all, try not to let the Snitch get into your mouth.” He said that last bit a little louder, for a certain Brit’s benefit.

“Hey, I won the game didn’t I?”

“The ends do justify the means.”

“Oh yeah, I can’t believe I forgot, Ron says thanks for the Oliver Wood thing.”

Warrick and Reiko both started laughing, it turned out that it was her idea.

“He finally got that eh? Good for him, I knew it would only take him two and a half months to figure it out. It’ll be good for him.” He was glad that Harry brought this up, now he was in a good mood and ready to swing his Beater bat with a total lack of mercy.

Hey, some people need to be happy to be violent. It takes all sorts.

Professor Janel Maloney was the announcer for the day, and she led off with the introductions.

“And first out, the reigning Quidditch Cup champion Cortez House!”

“ At Keeper, a Sophomore from Whitewater, Wisconsin, Jane Abbott!”

“ At Chaser, a Senior from Alice Springs, Oklahoma, Reiko Aylesworth!” .

“At Chaser, a Freshman from Georgetown, Michigan, Billy Amend!”

“At Chaser, a Sophomore from Oakdale, Illinois, Kim Cuthbert!”

“At Beater, a Novice from Bloomington, Indiana, Marty Coyle!” In the Shawnee stands, Keisha let out a big cheer there, explaining to those around her that family was family.

“At Captain and Beater, a Senior from Indianapolis, Indiana, Warrick Forrester!” Same cheer and explanation from Keisha.

“At Seeker, a Senior from Godric’s Hollow, Wales, Harry Potter!” Harry got the biggest cheer too, this was only his third game at Seeker in three plus years, not counting pickup games.

“And now the challengers from Shawnee House!” The cellar dwelling Shawnee House, who didn’t have Harry as Cortez did, Sally Jenkins as Jefferson did, or their entire starting seven back as Proctor did. This was going to be a long season.

“At Captain and Keeper, a Senior from Manistee, Michigan, Tim Spooneybarger!” He got a lot of cheers from the other Houses simply because he had a cool sounding name.

“At Chaser, a Junior from Coralville, Iowa, Mike Kelly!”

“At Chaser, a Junior from Memphis, Tennessee, Scott Thorman!”

“At Chaser, a Novice from Chicago, Illinois, Matt Franco!”

“At Beater, a Freshman from Detroit, Michigan, Ray King!”

“At Beater, from Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, Rick Camp!”

“At Seeker, a Sophomore from Grand Rapids, Minnesota, Julie Devine!” Julie’s older brother Joe had just graduated from Great Lakes, playing all 21 eligible games. She was the only girl to tryout for the team, and after last year’s all-male squad, Tim was relieved when she won her spot decisively.

Shawnee’s sole goal was not to get the Mercy Rule put in play, while Warrick had told his team that running up the score was their duty. Fred and George, sitting with Sophie and Marie in the Cortez section, were loudly echoing this notion, as poor Tim Spooneybarger flinched every time he heard their voices, at least in the first few minutes. He

took comfort in the fact that none of the three Chasers who had terrorized him back in June were facing him now.

Special guest referee Dwayne Stephens of the Death Valley Devil Dogs of the AQA, gave Warrick and Tim their instructions, and things got underway.

“And the Quaffle is up, Aylesworth takes it for Cortez.....she passes it to Amend who shoots....and scores!” That sure was quick, Tim had barely gotten into position. Reiko was content to be a facilitator for awhile, and the less than stellar Shawnee Chasers were not able to do much to stop her.....especially since Marty and Warrick were trying to murder them with Bludgers. Marty was really taking to being a Beater, the idea of swinging a bat and trying to hurt someone with it appealed to him somehow. It wasn't a 'thug' thing either, all of his friends in Bloomington were either white or mixed, like Keisha. He just like the visceral feel of swinging that bat and nailing something. Case in point:

WHAM!

Marty crushed a Bludger right into the back of Mike Kelly, the most talented of the Shawnee Chasers, at a range of only 20 meters. Kelly, a rather large young African-American man, managed to stay on his broom long enough to get to the ground, but he would be needing some serious chiropractic help in the near future. Dr. Carter was not a back specialist, but he gave Kelly a pain draught that allowed him to get back in the air if he was willing, and he was.

But Marty and Warrick smelled blood, and Kelly was no sooner back in the air than he was dodging Bludger after Bludger.

Well he was not dodging them all you see, he took one right in the gut and another that slammed into his right foot. That last one, another Marty special, spun him around dizzily and he flew right into the path of Cortez Chaser Billy Amend, who clipped Kelly hard on the head with the tip of his broom. This sent Amend, who happened to have the Quaffle, spinning end over end for a few seconds, and flat out knocked Kelly unconscious. Referee Dwayne Stephens was nearby,

and got Kelly to the ground before anything more could happen to him.

Reserve Chaser Greg McMichael, a Junior out of Grandville, Michigan, got his first ever Quidditch action as he rose to take Kelly's place. He was lucky in that Warrick and Marty independently assumed that if he couldn't start for this bunch, he wasn't a threat, so they started terrorizing returning starter Scott Thorman. Thorman was no dummy, and he quickly sped away from the Cortez Beaters as fast as he could.

Reiko was loving every second of this, as she, Amend, and Cuthbert were now playing against 1.5 Chasers and a pair of Beaters who seemed afraid to get too close to the Bludgers, for fear that Marty and Warrick would beat them to the balls and proceed to hurt them. The score was soon 150-0 as poor Tim Spooneybarger had stopped half the shots against him, but to no avail. Jane Abbott just sat there in the Cortez goal with nothing to do, as Harry had shown her Ron's performance via pensieve with a 'do this, but don't do that' lecture, as she had never technically faced a real Shawnee shot on goal. Not that today would prove to be any kind of change.

The Snitch was hiding, as American Snitches tended to do, but as there was no real chance of Cortez losing the game, Harry wasn't worried. He spent some time watching Warrick and Marty, and a little time doing some crowd watching. The Shawnee stands were filled with cheers for Spooneybarger and not much else, while the Cortez stands were yelling like crazy for Reiko and company every time they scored a goal

By the time Harry saw the Snitch for the first time, it was 230-0 and he felt so bad for Tim that he really went after it hard, just as Marty knocked Scott Thorman out of the game with a shot to the sternum that nearly gave the older boy a heart murmur. The sternum is a hard bone, and most Chasers wore protective vests anyway, but the Bludger is a very solid ball, and even at 40 meters, Thorman was knocked out, both of the game and his faculties.

The Snitch seemed to take pity on the Shawnee Chasers, of which there was now only one starter left, and it let Harry catch it after just a

half minute of The Boy Who Lived flying as hard as he could. Harry grabbed it near Jane in the Cortez goal, the closest she had come to actually seeing some Quidditch played right in front of her

“And Harry Potter has the Snitch! Cortez wins 390-0!” Cortez went crazy with cheering, while Jefferson clapped politely, mindful that two of Harry’s cohorts resided in their House. The Proctor Chasers, who were next in line to face Cortez, were looking at each other worriedly as they openly speculated on whether Marty would get any bigger in the next six months. Then they looked at Warrick, at 6’4 and 220 pounds, and seemed resigned to it.

Shawnee carried Tim Spooneybarger off the field on their shoulders, he had stopped 31 out of a possible 55 shots with practically no help from anyone but a merciful God. Tim had the Sally Jenkins experience coming up in his next game, and personally Harry thought that the guy was nothing but a masochist if he was still willing to get in goal by then. Tim would have another grab bag of WWW products waiting under his bed when he and his girlfriend got back to his room that night, with a note from Fred and George saying that they would speak to some BQL scouts about him. Plus, they really dug that name.

By amusing contrast, Jane Abbott was still an unknown quantity really as a Keeper, she had such a stout defense that she had not given up a goal in a year on anything but a penalty shot. Her real test would be against Sally Jenkins come June, whether Harry played Chaser in that game or not.

Marty and Warrick were named Players of the Game, and believe it or not Marty was actually pretty humble about it. He gave all the credit to Warrick as a Captain and tutor, and nearly gave his cousin a heart attack while making him listen to it. When queried later on by Harry, Marty just shrugged:

“Hey man, it’s true right? Gotta give credit where it’s due. You and him taught me a lot and I’m grateful.” In truth, Marty had heard so many stories and rumors about Harry that he snapped to it whenever his surrogate cousin wanted him to do something.

Reiko wound up scoring only a quarter of Cortez' 24 goals, but assisted directly on 17 of the 18 others, as Billy and Kim each had nine. Reiko had no interest in professional Quidditch except to watch, but she was still pleased at her improvement during her seven game career, which did include one caught Snitch in the Jefferson game.

As he left the field, Harry was met by Janet Evans, the Commissioner of the American Quidditch League for their planned meeting. Evans, an Olympic swimmer of some major note in her younger years, was basically the do-it-all person for American Quidditch, running the National Team as well, which was ramping up for the World Cup next summer, which it had qualified for just a few weeks earlier. She, Harry, and a surprised to be invited by Evans Sophie repaired to what Harry called the "Controversy Conference Room", where Harry had all of his after action reports with friends and faculty. Dobby served out sandwiches and Snapple, and Evans laid out her 10 minute pitch to keep Harry playing Quidditch in The United States, ending with:

"Look Harry, we all know that you have options galore waiting for you, and not just with Quidditch. But with our league you can help build something. Your presence will attract other top foreign players, not to mention keep some of our best players here. Like your former teammate John Geyser, he took a less lucrative deal in Malaysia because he wanted a more secure looking league." That brought up something that Harry wanted to talk about.

"I'm not so much concerned with money as I am the quality of play and the quality of life. It's no secret that I'm going to stay here for university, but I do worry about the viability of the AQA." No, money was not a factor, not anymore.

"We're very solid Harry, we have just chosen not to expand for the time being. All four of our team owners are very wealthy, ranging from a net worth of \$20 million to \$230 million, and they are in it to stay. I'm not saying that we'll get into a bidding war with your countrymen, but we'll match whatever offer you get from them." She either didn't know that half the BQA owners wouldn't touch Harry with a ten foot pole, or didn't let on that she knew this. In fact the word 'Voldemort'

never crossed her lips during the entirety of the meeting. Harry didn't mention his British troubles either, figuring that if she wanted to talk about them she would.

"In your letter you implied that I might get to select my own team?"

"If you have a strong preference for one team in particular that can be arranged."

He didn't really, with floo travel he could play for anyone, and Harry did not really want to go down the road of demanding things just for the hell of it. Except with his next question:

"Just out of curiosity, what did you think of Warrick Forrester's play today?"

Evans was ready for that, and had been wondering what took Harry so long to bring it up.

"In all honesty, until today he was a borderline draft pick if you were not in the equation. But he and his young cousin were pretty impressive today. He has the right size, and he has improved greatly over the last years that I've watched his games. I'm sure all four of our teams would have been willing to sign him or draft him if it meant getting your signature on a contract, but he might be drafted by us anyway if he plays like that again, especially against Jefferson." Evans herself had gone to Pathfinder and her muggle high school on a time turner deal that was exactly like Uncle Antonio's. She continued:

"Next you will be asking about Ron Weasley."

"I had not decided on that one actually, whether to bring him up or not." She doubted that very seriously, but didn't mention it.

"We had someone at the game last week and he was good, but not great, the shutout notwithstanding."

“Why am I sensing that I would have to choose if I want one of my mates on the team?”

“That all really depends on the team Harry. Let’s take New York for example, they’re the lowest ranked team so far this season: They do not really need a Keeper, but could use a Beater and a Seeker. The fact that you can play Chaser well makes you a good fit with any team, here or abroad. Other teams might need a Keeper, such as Death Valley. Speaking candidly, if you made it a deal breaker, I imagine all four teams would sign Forrester, Weasley, and even Aylesworth if they had to.”

That got a laugh out of both Harry and Sophie.

“Well I’ll mention that to Reiko, but I doubt she would be interested.” He asked some more procedural questions, mostly about practice times and how the schedule would and would not interfere with his university classes. They also talked about some of the history of the AQA and Sophie, who swam competitively as a child, coaxed some Olympic stories out of Evans too. It seemed like no time before Dobby popped in to tell them that people were heading to the second game. They all stood up and shook hands all around.

“Well Harry, Sophie, thanks for taking the time.”

“You’re welcome Janet, you have given me a lot to think about. All I can tell you right now is that The Australasian League is not in the running, I’ve declined a meeting like this with their commissioner. I can also tell you that money really is not a compelling factor with me, though I would want market value. You said that your league would match the BQA’s offer, that’s good enough for me. It all depends on how things go over the next five months, but right now you’re probably ahead in the race if you want to know the truth.” Evans could tell that he was sincere, and that brought a large smile to her face.

“That’s good news Harry, and I’ll inform our managers as such. I’ll look forward to hearing from you in March, or earlier if you have any concerns or questions.” The deadline for applying to the American

draft was May 15, but the British deadline was March 31, so Harry would have to decide before his next game. He could look forward to some Christmas time pressure from Arthur and Molly, and he was sure that Travis and Rufus would want to weigh in as well.

The afternoon game was a very short affair at 20 minutes, a 150 all tie. Sally Jenkins got her 15 goals, but our man Ray Elwood got the Snitch right after her last goal. The Proctor Chasers were not bad per se, they were just flummoxed by the Jefferson defense, and there really was one, if only so Sally could get the Quaffle whenever she wanted it. The Jefferson players now knew that they had to beat Cortez if they wanted the title, and it would be best if they wiped out Shawnee beforehand. During the game, Dobby popped over to tell Harry that Hufflepuff had beaten Slytherin 180-20 in a very quick contest. The Hufflepuffs did not miss Zach Smith too much, while the Slytherins weren't very good even before their second best Chaser and best Beater were arrested for treason.

Quodpot the next day was uneventful as well. Jonas, who needed to be the scorer this year for Jefferson, scored 12 goals and assisted on 10 others as Jefferson took Proctor to the woodshed, 25-9. Shawnee got a little revenge on Cortez in the second game, though the score was a strikingly close 18-15, the young Cortez players, not a Senior among them, showing some grit. This wouldn't do much for them this year, but in 1998-9, they would not finish in last place, not by a long-shot.

The trials for the arrested students were held the following week, taking on the average of an hour apiece over a three day period. Each student confessed under Veritaserum that they had willingly been part of the network, there was no blackmail or Imperious involved. They all, save Theo, Crabbe, and Goyle, had received five year sentences in Azkaban, to begin immediately. Crabbe and Goyle had spent longer under the drugs, and had wound up confessing to a lot more, though no murder was involved. They were sentenced to 15 years, with an extra decade being attached to Theo for being the ringleader. In a last ditch effort to spare himself, he had offered to cut a deal, but Rufus felt that he had cut too many deals already.

The Death Eater trials were delayed until November, all to weaken them that much more. Flint did his bit in the Gibbon questioning, as well as his own information, and he 'escaped', just like they planned. That was two 'escapes' among the six assassins, with Fricke being the other one, but Rufus had a plan of how to hide that during the trials of the remaining four, plus Gibbon.

Saturday, October 18, 1997

Riddle Manor II, Island 12, The Orkneys

Main Conference Room

2:00 pm GMT

Pettigrew, Nott, Bella, and Parrish were all waiting for their Master to come back. He was chatting with Dr. Nixon in his private study over the status of Karla Fricke, who was due to be taken out of her coma anytime now. Parrish had fetched her from Bodo a few minutes earlier, again not noticing the Aurors outside his complex there, who had found it more useful to track the comings and goings there rather than raid it and arrest Parrish.

Wormtail had not been punished for his failed plan, to his total and complete surprise. The bad man said that they had all underestimated Rufus for the last time. How was Pettigrew to know that the Aurors were being told to stun and not kill. This rational treatment said quite a bit about how Voldemort valued Pettigrew, though it bothered the rat a little, wondering when the other shoe was to drop. That said, Frederick Nott was vastly bothered by the fact that his son had been sentenced to 25 years in Azkaban the week before, with his wand forever snapped. Frederick and Peter had had two barely civil conversations about the aftermath of the rat's big plan, and they now only encountered each other by accident or when the bad man summoned them to a meeting.

Here he was now, Nixon was levitating Fricke in front of him, while Voldemort glided along behind. Fricke was propped up in a chair, and Nixon waved his wand at her a couple of times, waking her up.

“Where am I?”

Pettigrew, at a nod from Voldemort, responded.

“You are at Headquarters Karla. You’ve been in a coma for a couple of weeks now. How do you feel?”

“Tired, but I’ll live. The last thing I remember is being in Borgin and Burkes.”

“That’s the last thing you should remember, you fell unconscious afterward.”

Fricke now rubbed her eyes and took a look around. And she saw Bellatrix Black.

Her Imperious conditioning kicked in immediately, as she managed to get a hold of Pettigrew’s wand, which was already half out of the left pocket of his robe. Her reflexes were dull from two weeks of disuse, but it seemed like a fraction of a second before she had the wand pointed at Bella’s chest.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

End Chapter

Author's Note: The Robert Marr biological tracker is somewhat explained in this chapter. Just know that it has no relation to any actual biology, canon magic, or common sense for the most part, except by accident. Ah the wonder of make believe. Also, a real life world figure is introduced in this chapter, and resemblance to that person's real behavior is completely coincidental I promise. That person may or may not appear in the future, who knows. Oh, some of you may have noticed that I've invented a word: Magicals. That is basically my way of referring to Wizards and Witches without any gender based issues.

Saturday, October 18, 1997, continued

2:05 pm GMT

Riddle Manor II, Island 12, The Orkneys

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Fricke's reflexes may have been slow, but Bellatrix Black, like Fenrir Greyback before her, was not Harry Potter. And a Killing Curse from two meters away dead in the chest is a guarantee of death. She grunted, and slumped to the floor, dead.

Nott, the only other person in the room with a wand handy, whipped his out and took aim at Fricke, but Voldemort stopped him.

“Nott, do not fire!”

Incredulous, Nott did not spit out his own Killing Curse, but instead looked at his Master, who pointed to Fricke:

She was weeping, Pettigrew's wand had been dropped on the table in front of her. With her 'task' completed, the Imperious conditioning was gone, and the full implications of what she had done were upon her. She put her hands over her face, expecting death to come at any second, or at least Cruciatus. Not all Death Eaters were hard and/or fearless of death it seemed. She felt only a tickle in her mind, as Voldemort invaded it with his own, he didn't need the bother of a

wand for this kind of thing. Pettigrew picked his wand up off the table and stood back with Nott, allies again for the time being in wanting immediate retribution. Fricke got one sentence out between wails:

“I tried to stop it, I tried!” The speed with which she fired on Bella would seem to contradict that, but she really did seem sincere. However little it really mattered in the end.

The bad man finished things up in a couple of silent minutes, silent on his part anyway, all the while Bella lay dead on the floor, with only Parrish seeming to be concerned, he liked Bella all in all. Voldemort waved his hand at Fricke, and she slumped in her chair, stunned for the moment.

“Imperious obviously, though the footprints were erased. Redgrave I’m assuming, he’s the only one there who is that exact.” Head Obliviator Steven Redgrave had resisted Death Eater recruitment back in the day, and Voldemort had done everything but get on his hands and knees in order to get someone with that strong and valuable a skill-set into his organization.

“Scrimgeour my Lord?”

“Undoubtedly, apparently he did not appreciate our attempt on Potter. Those two have gotten closer than any of us realized.” The analytical tone was rare for Voldemort, but this was a rare moment for him in general.

Voldemort was taking this really well, or so Nott and Pettigrew both thought. Neither really wanted to say anything right about how, but Pettigrew felt that he should at least make an attempt.

“My Lord, was it possible to check her for Imperious while her brain was damaged? Is this something that we could have prevented?” He was rewarded when the look on his boss’ face seem to appreciate him.....well not falling on his sword, but at least pricking his foot with it.

“Yes, but hindsight is always 20/20, to quote that muggle expression, an accurate one for once. We should have done a preliminary round in Bodo, but there is one problem: I still would have wanted Bella there. The Imperious could have been aimed at any of us, though undoubtedly Scrimgeour and Potter have plans for you Wormtail, with your life debt.” That was one reason that Voldemort had all of Pettigrew’s mail and correspondence vetted by.....well vetted by Bella until now. He would need a new addition to his inner circle, he wanted more varied ideas than just Nott and Pettigrew.

“They can plan all they like my Lord, I am committed to the cause.” Pettigrew even sounded like he believed it.

“I know you are Wormtail. Bella gone.” The last words were as wistful as Voldemort was capable of being. The bad man understood the concept of love, but had never actually felt the emotion, and with Bellatrix Black it was no different. She was a trusted advisor whose bonus duties included satisfying his physical needs, no more no less. Still, it was a blow, losing someone of her value to his organization and his overall plan.

“My Lord, what are your orders?” Nott had felt that he should say something there, and that was a pretty easy thing to ask.

Voldemort looked at the three men, and the unconscious woman, and started formulating his plans.

“Nott, start on an Azkaban plan. I don’t want to just hit it and get our people back, I want to take it over, make it our Southern Headquarters. Re-open negotiations with the remaining Dementors and see what needs to be done there.”

“Yes my Lord.” Frederick Nott loved this idea, and that he would be in charge of it. He wanted his son back.

“Peter, you and Michael take whatever supplies of Veritaserum you need and begin questioning all of our troops. Make sure that Scrimgeour and Biller have not slipped anyone in here. I know you just did it a couple of months ago, but do it again. Show me your

script before you begin, but I want it up and running by Monday morning.” Both nodded, and Pettigrew was already composing a list of question in his head, he would only have 20 minutes per person, per dose.

“I have 150 doses of Veritaserum ready my Lord, with another 100 brewing as we speak. There is a storehouse in France that I am familiar with, if you will allow me a dozen troops with which to raid it. There is more than just Veritaserum there, and it is relatively unprotected.” Nott nearly choked on his non-existent beer at hearing Parrish say that; the Potions Master had never shown any operational interest before. The bad man just smiled.

“You will have them, but you will not go yourself. We have already lost Gibbon because of such a thing, and you know too much about our plans to leave here again. Make your preparations to close down the Bodo complex and move all of it here.”

“Yes sir, I can probably have that done by the end of next month. I just started a series of 30 day potions there, including some Veritaserum.” Parrish had no clue that his complex there was riddled with Listening Charms and other surveillance, counter-intelligence really was not his thing, and the now deceased Ms. Black had grown somewhat lax in her babysitting duties when she was there.

“Good.” He said nothing else, and was looking toward the doorway.

Pettigrew really did not want to ask this next question, but it looked as if his boss had no further instructions for them.

“My Lord, what do you want me to do with Fricke?” That generated a pause, but a brief one.

“I don’t like to lose troops Wormtail, especially ones whose transgressions were not necessarily their fault. Unfortunately though, Fricke’s brain injuries were too severe to allow her to live, such a pity. Avada Kedavra.” A lazily pointed hand, with barely any heft to the voice.

And Karla Fricke was no longer among the living. Voldemort felt that he just did not need the reminder. He turned to Nott.

“Take Bella’s body out back and bury her, but remove her hair first, we might need to keep up a fiction that she is alive via Polyjuice. I want Fricke’s body burned immediately, there is no telling what else she may be carrying inside her.” This was really just a lucky guess, Voldemort was thinking along the lines of anthrax and the like, which magicals did have treatments for, but only if used right away. He was as knowledgeable about the muggle world that he disdained as any Death Eater, and more than most. He walked away, ruminating on one more piece of the still infant Azkaban plan that he would have to take care of himself.

“Yes my Lord, it will be done.”

The problem with that was, the Aurors were aware of Fricke’s death the moment that it happened. The biological tracker was a virus that was planted in the user via a simple syringe. It contained a special radioactive isotope that Marr had reverse engineered from a muggle device, Marr was muggleborn and had always been fascinated by things like that as a child. The issue with the reconstruction of it was not the isotope itself, Marr had plenty of that stored away, but with the device to track it with. The device, called the Marr Matrix in honor of its creator, gave out a signal from a range of 500 kilometers, and the signal got stronger as the MM got closer to its target.

That device had originally been used by, and in the custody of, Mara Henderson. Henderson was Fudge’s personal bodyguard among the Aurors, and she and her crew were used for most of his dirty work. This was something then Head Auror Rufus had been fully aware of, but could do nothing about without jeopardizing his own position at a time when Umbridge was already gunning for him. All three of them had been killed during the Lucius Malfoy trial attack, having been stationed inside the courtroom where all the Aurors were the first targets, and Mara had hidden the device well enough that no one ever found it. And one can be certain that a serious attempt was made after Fudge spilled the beans on it, before his most unfortunate memory loss. Marr had been told many times that mum was the word,

and he did as he was told, not thinking to tell the new Minister, our man Rufus, about it. Shortly thereafter of course, he had been committed to St. Mungos for his most recent visit.

At this moment, Nelson DeMille and his crew were on the north coast of Scotland, zeroing in on which island that the Death Eaters were on. They had it narrowed to five when the signal went dead. DeMille looked at the MM and jiggered it a little, but it was still blank. He turned to Chris Knight and Michael Cherito, his crew members.

“Well not only is she dead, they destroyed the body.”

“Would they know to do that? Maybe they know about the tracker?”

“I highly doubt it Michael, it’s not been let out of the family, aside from Potter probably.” Not that DeMille minded that, he thought it was about time that The Ministry was actually cooperating with the kid, whom his Sixth Year daughter Alexa had always had a secret crush on.

“No one has to worry if he’s loyal or not.” All three men laughed, Travis had told them the story of Theo’s minerals. They liked the kid, though only Knight had ever met him officially.

“Not in the slightest. No, this is just that nutcase being thorough. We can’t rely on him to screw up every time can we? Chris, go report this to Headquarters and see what Travis wants us to do. Michael and I will hold in place until you come back.”

“Got it boss.” Knight Apparated away, and DeMille let out a brief scream.

“Damn it! Five more minutes and we would have had them!”

“At least Lestrage must be dead, for them to have killed her that quickly.” Cherito still thought of her as Bellatrix Lestrage and not Bellatrix Black.

“She damn well better be Michael, she damn well better be.”

Knight returned 15 minutes later, with instructions from Biller to find the nearest hotel and stay there, The Minister was going to need more manpower than Auror Command could spare right now. He was going to get some special help, and it might take a couple of days. More instructions were to follow.

Meanwhile, a few hours later in Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

Harry and Sophie were eating, alone, in Mario's, the restaurant where they had had their first date, over 14 months previous. The chicken fettuccine alfredo was marvelous, and Sophie's lasagna all but melted in her mouth as they were both transported back to a time when:

Well when things were much the same as they were now, only they knew each other a lot better, both mentally and emotionally. And yes, carnally. Believe it or not though sports fans, but Harry had his mind currently on the first two aspects.

"It's always so quiet in here, I love that." He had always had impressions of restaurants being noisy places, but Mario's had so many nooks and crannies that even when it was full it wasn't that loud.

"I think you should buy it."

"Buy what? Mario's?" That wasn't a half bad idea really, now that Harry thought about it. He had the cash, would be getting a lot more, and there were worse things to purchase than where his first date with the woman he loved had been.

"Just kidding, your English cooking stuff would ruin it."

"They have Italian restaurants in Blighty you know, and when was the last time we had anything truly 'English' anyway?"

"Um. Well. Okay, you've got me there." She squeezed his hand on top of the table.

“You just wait til Christmas Break and we have haggis with your family. Though that’s Scottish cooking if one wants to be technical. The last thing you want to do is refer to a Scot as English.” Even at Hogwarts, brawls had started over that kind of thing.

“You’re not really going to go through with that are you?”

“Your dad called my bluff dearest, I don’t think I have a choice.”

“When the time comes, are you going to ask his permission?” Sophie loved Harry’s abrupt segues, and decided to turn the tables on him for once. Being the master of them though, Harry recovered very quickly.

“To marry you?”

“It’s old fashioned, but you are too sometimes.”

“I’m not asking your dad for directions to the loo, let alone for your hand in marriage. That’s for you to give, not him.”

“What if he was an ordinary father?”

What’s that? But Harry didn’t say that, not wanting to ruin the moment.

“Then he and I would have a chat, which I’m sure Father Weir would love. No, they’ll know after you do, and after the twins, and the rest of the gang, and Dobby and Winky……” Sophie stopped him before he started listing everyone else he knew.

“I get the idea Harry. But be prepared for some more questions come Christmas Break.”

“Will we have answers though?”

“I love it when you trap me like that.”

“Oh really? How did I trap you?”

“I’m not going to ask you when you’re going to ask me to marry you.” That he was actually going to ask was not in any doubt, for either of them.

“There really isn’t room here to get on bended knee. But that jewelry store in Indianapolis where I got you that watch.....well they had a nice selection of diamond rings.”

“Not that you were looking of course.”

“Well we did have 15 minutes to spare. It won’t be your Christmas present mind you, but when we’re shopping there.....”

“So I get to be there eh?”

“How else will I know what size to get?” Sophie wore no rings on either hand, so he couldn’t swipe one for comparison.

“Interesting, very interesting. Did you get pointers from Bill?” Harry assumed that she meant about proposing, and so he laid a whopper on her.

“Nope, she asked him.”

“WHAT!?” After which she immediately clapped her hand over her mouth. But no one in the mostly empty restaurant seemed to notice, though Harry loved the reaction

“Yes ma’am, though she didn’t get on bended knee, which I certainly will.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Just make sure Murray is standing up with us, we owe her big time.” For introducing them.

“I got her a nice Christmas present didn’t I?”

“Yes you did, as did I. You know, I think I will make an offer for this place. I’ll send a message to Michael when we get back, have him look into it.” Michael Steele, father of Jonas, did this thing all the time, buying muggle properties for magicals.

“An everlasting memento?” They both smiled, and squeezed hands a little harder.

“That’s a nice way of putting it. Maybe I’ll play for the Milwaukee team in the AQA, so we don’t have to floo so much.” He sighed and leaned back in his chair. Very comfortable our Harry was.

“Who will be best man though? How will you pick a twin?”

“This will irritate Ron to no end, but they’ll both be my best.....well, ‘men’. I couldn’t just choose. They don’t have to of course, Lee will be best man for one, I will be for the other.” Or so the twins had told both Lee and Harry, a double wedding was always seen as a given, not that Alicia and Angelina minded.

“I can’t wait to see that wedding.”

“You won’t have much longer to wait, if I’m reading the signs correctly.”

“Christmas?”

“It’s not out of the realm, though again Ron will be upset, since that’s when he’s going to propose to Hermione.”

“He told you that?”

“No, Hermione did, and since she knows everything he’s going to do before he does it, I’m taking it as gospel.”

“Now, now.” She wasn’t serious, she loved it anytime Harry chose to analyze the still opposites attract relationship of Ron and Hermione.

“Hey, I’m not criticizing, I’m just being honest.”

“Uh huh.”

They went to less weighty subjects for the rest of the meal, and upon exiting the restaurant, talk turned to Halloween, the big party being only a couple of weeks away.

“C’mon Sophie, can’t we just go as Calvin and Hobbes again? It worked the last time.”

“You don’t mind Warrick laughing at you like that?”

“Like he didn’t look more ridiculous as Batman. I mean if Batman was that big, would he need all of those gadgets? Now a shrimp like me as Batman, I would need that utility belt and the cool car.”

“True, as nuts as you sounded just now.”

“I’ll ignore that. So can we just do last year’s costumes? I mean we can still go to the costume shop and all with the others and poke around.”

“Whatever you want is fine with me.” That brought her boyfriend up short.

“Boy that doesn’t get said a whole lot, I should have saved it for something more weighty.” He was rewarded with smack on the arm.

“And now you’re about to say that you were just kidding.”

“Yes I was, you didn’t give me a chance before you started swinging.”

She was spared having to give a rejoinder when Reiko and Warrick came up to them, they had reached the designated meeting place.

Jonas and Claudia had gone with Drew and Marie and her friends, and were going to meet them at the mall.

The rest of the day was pretty uneventful, though everyone noticed that Harry was spending a bit more than usual. He nearly bought out the video store, or at least it seemed that way, and his CD collection was now well into triple digits and heading north at a rapid rate of speed. If he kept it up, he might need an extra trunk. When queried about this, Harry just shrugged.

“I like having options, what can I say.”

Later that day, after they got back to Great Lakes, Harry did indeed send Dobby to Michael Steele with a note, asking Michael to inquire about the potential availability of Mario's. Though a bit surprised, Michael did his due diligence on Monday morning, and informed Harry that Mario's was owned by someone who had basically beat Harry to the punch, by a period of 15 years anyway. J.D. McPherson, a Milwaukee construction magnate, had proposed to his wife there over 30 years before. It wasn't until 1982 that he had had a Harry-like inspiration and bought out the previous owners for a premium, them having inherited the eatery from their parents, the founders.

Michael gave him a call anyway, and after learning that the restaurant was a slight money loser, was told that no, it was not for sale. Yet. McPherson, 55 years old, informed Michael that his children were not interested in the restaurant business, and that if Harry kept some lines of communication open, he could buy it once J.D. moved beyond the realm of the living.

“So I've got to wait until the guy dies to buy the place?”

Drew had been reading Michael's typed response while Harry was digesting it.

“So it would seem, it says that you should make clear your intentions, and if he thinks you're an okay guy, he'll put a codicil in his will that says that the estate should sell to you. He seems like the sentimental type, according to Michael.”

“Oh this is just what I need in my life right now, correspondence with some stranger so that I can satisfy my whim of the moment.” No sports fans, Sophie was not in the room. Thankfully.

“Set up something in December the next time we go to Flackter Alley. You don’t need to make anything up really, just leave out a few details. Like that you’re magical, and just where you got your money from. Small things like that.”

“Thank you for being so droll about it Drew.”

“I’m here to help.”

Monday, October 20, 1997

10:00 am GMT

Number 10 Downing Street, London

Office of the Prime Minister of Her Majesty’s Government

One of his aides popped her head inside the open door:

“Tony, there is a Rufus Scrimgeour here to see you.”

That name still cracked him up, even months after he had heard it for the first time. He smiled briefly and closed his eyes before answering his assistant.

“Send him in please Tara, and shut the door afterward, with no calls unless it’s the Queen.” She did as asked, and within seconds Rufus was entering his counterpart’s office, for only the third time since Tony Blair had been elected Prime Minister. The first had been the usual ‘Guess what? There is a magical world right next to you that you don’t even know about’ talk that every Minister of Magic had with a new Prime Minister or King/Queen. The second had been an update on Voldemort. Tony Blair could only dread what this one was about. His magical counterpart walked in the door and took a chair.

“Rufus, good to see you again.”

“You said that so convincingly Tony, I almost believed it that time.” Rufus liked the guy on the whole, at least he didn’t need Obliviation as John Major had after a couple of instances. Blair’s predecessor had not taken the Sirius Black situation very well.

“I am a politician you know. What can I do for you?”

“My compliments on your handling of the Diana business. I assume that you were the one who finally got Queen Elizabeth to act like a human being?” Blair got a lot of those compliments, and they had long since started to wear on him.

“What do you want Rufus, we don’t have all day here you know. I probably have half a dozen staffers researching your name on the internet right now.” Wouldn’t do them any good of course, even with a unique sounding and spelling name like that.

“Things have escalated.”

“With your Voldemort chap?”

“Yes, he tried to put a hit on young Harry.” He had given Blair chapter and verse on Harry Potter at the last meeting.

“Why do I get the idea that he missed?”

“Badly, though it gave me the excuse I needed to shake thing up.”

“The Dumbledore I keep hearing about?”

“The very man. But in return, I put a hit out on Voldemort’s mistress, and it worked, or so we believe.”

“Something tells me that that is not a good thing for me.”

“You are told correctly. Voldemort keeps losing battle after battle, and sometime soon, he is going to snap. Now I have to put Contingency Plan Delta into effect very soon, and I want you lot to be prepared.” He prayed that Blair would not ask what Contingency Plan Delta entailed, and was rewarded when the muggle only thought about his this affected him.

“Is he going to start terror activities against us?”

“It is the most logical play for him to make, try to terrorize you and make us come to the bargaining table and give him what he wants.”

“How badly have you been beating him?”

“We estimate that over 1/3 of his strength has been lost, as well as a like number of his financial connections, if not a little more. But we do have a lead on where he might be, and that is where I need your help.”

“Where is he?”

“The Orkneys.”

“It would be too much to hope that you know exactly where.” There were over 70 islands in the Orkney archipelago.

“Tony, would I need you if I had that information?”

“No you would not. What do you need me to do?” He knew he wouldn’t like whatever it was, and very quickly had the satisfaction of being correct.

“I need one or more of your frigates to do a firing exercise in that region. The island that they are on is not visible to the muggle eye of course, so firing into the water is what we need. Only we hope that some of those shots will not land on the water.”

“Unplottable, I believe you call it.”

Rufus was very impressed, and it showed on his face.

“Thank you for remembering, a facile mind makes things easier here. Unplottable makes the island invisible, but it does not mean that your shells simply disappear, they have to land somewhere. Muggle Repelling Charms are no doubt in place, but I can have a spell put on your munitions that will negate that.” He hoped anyway, his main man in Experimental Charms, Trevor Shipp, assured him that the new counter-Charm would do the trick.

“I thought you people didn’t use our weaponry?”

“We don’t, we simply need to find the island, and the damage path will do so. I will have one of my people onboard the ship as a civilian observer and he can place the Charms on the shells and missiles. Once he locates what he needs to locate, the exercise can move on. He will not actually be firing the weapon, so our ‘code’, if you want to call it that, will not be violated.” Not that that hair splitting would help him if this ever got out.

“You don’t want much do you?”

“In the grand scheme of things? When was the last time we asked for your help? With Black, and that was four years ago. I would say that we have been pretty good about that, to say nothing of the fact that we have not pressed matters with Prince William.” Who was, in fact, magical, about the same level of magical ability, once trained up if it ever got that far, as Ginny Weasley.

“His parents refused the letter from what I understand, it was their right. He knew about it when it happened. Just like your Harry Potter.” It would seem that Tony had picked John Major’s brain a bit, Major had not been Obliviated after his defeat as a matter of courtesy. That would change after Blair resigned or lost his next election, or so Rufus decided on the spur of the moment.

“Do I have your agreement on my plan Tony?”

“You’ll just make me do it if I don’t agree, using your tricks.”

“Probably, but your willing participation would be more palatable for my conscience.”

Blair sighed, and picked up the phone.

“Tara, get me a phone meeting with Admiral Wexler for this afternoon please.” He hung up the phone and looked pointedly at Rufus.

“Thank you Tony. Whether this works or not, I owe you a favor, and I never forget my debts.”

“I’m glad to be of help Rufus. Have your man here tomorrow morning at 8:00 am.”

“Will do, his name is Travis Biller, my Head Auror.”

“Nice to be dealing with high level people.”

“There is no one I trust more in the world than Travis, he’ll get it done the way we need to.”

Blair believed him when he said that, but thought of one other question, somewhat pertinent.

“I should probably ask if time is of the essence?”

“I know your ships can’t move on the drop of a hat for something like this, so at any point within the next two weeks should do it, or even a little longer. If he moves before that, well that will tell us something too.”

“That seems reasonable, I’ll get back to you through your man Biller.”

“Thank you Tony, I’ll show myself out.” They shook hands, and Rufus departed. He strolled down Downing Street, passing a quick walking Gordon Brown on his way, and Alastair Campbell a few ticks later. Rufus stopped for a moment to observe the bustle, a lot like Alice in Wonderland or so he thought. His little world had just 20,000 people, the size of a mid-size muggle town. But here he was, asking the Prime Minister of Great Britain to move a fleet of ships for him. People passing by wondered at the man with such a broad grin on his face, as he made his way to the Underground so he could get back to the office, with Rob Graham and Edgar Stiles, on protection detail, joining him at the end of Downing Street.

It was fun to have power in the world.

Saturday, November 1, 1997

The Ministry of Magic, Medical Wing

10:00 am GMT

Lucius Malfoy was still considered to be under arrest, but he was sick enough still that he was confined to his hospital bed for the near future. It seemed that his cracked skull would be haunting him for quite some time, even though it had been over three months since he had suffered it. Dr. Elizabeth Mitchell was handling the case for St. Mungo’s, and she assured Rufus that Malfoy would be well enough to actually go to prison by Christmas time, after his brief but completely legitimate trial. The Minister had quietly leaked the information of where Lucius was, hoping to goad someone into a rescue attempt, but so far no dice.

Remus and Draco took the private floo link between The Headmaster’s Office and The Minister’s Office, and arrived just after Draco’s dad had finished breakfast. Remus Disillusioned himself right before entering the room, he wanted to be there for Draco without giving Lucius another setback. Draco walked quietly up to his father’s bed and sat down, the older man had dozed off for a second.

“Hello Father.”

Lucius woke up and rubbed his eyes, more out of habit than anything.

“Who’s there?”

“You know who this is Father.”

“Who’s there!?” Lucius sat up as best he could in the bed and jerked his head from side to side.

It was then that Draco discovered that his father was now blind, that was how much damage had been done. All the potions they could find could not come up with a cure, and his mother had ‘neglected’ to tell him about it, even though she was using the Malfoy money to fund the potions experiments. Draco saw the glassy look on Lucius’ face and realized the truth, which had the strange effect of making him feel sorry for his father, an emotion he had never felt before, at least toward his sire. After a few moments taking this in, he tried a different tack.

“Who else calls you Father but me?”

“Draco?”

“The very one.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see how you are doing.”

“What’s the point? You betrayed us.” It would seem that Voldemort had not wiped that part of Lucius’ memory.

“Did I have another choice? Would your Master have taken me back after I became a werewolf?”

“He might have, you could have been a weapon against them.”

“And what were the chances of that Father, one in a hundred?” Draco actually thought it was more like one in a million, but he didn’t want to go too far here.

“How did you get hooked on that muggle filth in the first place?” Not an unfair question.

Draco took some time to answer that, and only because Lucius’ hearing had become acute because of his blindness did he not think that his son had left, he would have heard the chair move.

“I needed a release Father, a way to escape.”

“Escape from what? You had one of the easiest lives in Hogwarts. You were a leader in Slytherin from the time you were 11 years old.”

“I needed an escape from that Father, an escape from a cause that I wasn’t sure could be won.”

“You people constantly overestimate Potter.”

“If he’s so weak, why does Voldemort want him dead so badly? If he is no threat, why does he need to be eliminated?”

“He is not weak you idiot, he is undisciplined and too bent on revenge to be any real bother. Dumbledore messed him up so badly that he will never be a threat. He will be too intent on making up for the lack of comfort at that muggle house. I was relieved when he slunk off to America, then we could focus on what was important in the war.”

That theory had certainly occurred to more people than just Draco, his mother had said much the same thing. Draco ignored her political theorizing though, as she was generally not very good at it. He sloughed off Lucius’ view of it too, as it was poisoned by hate.

“You never really answered me Father. What else could I have done?”

“I did answer you, you could have been smart enough not to be trapped in the first place. I’m not saying you deserved to be bitten, I am not that cruel, and you are my son. But if you really want to know what I think, then I will tell you. You should have left the country, much like your new friend Potter did. At least you would have had a good reason, your mother and I would have supported you financially.”

“I was in a bed much like this one, under constant guard, much like you are. I cut the best deal I could. They never would have let me emigrate Father, I was too prize a catch for them to let go. And I wanted no part of a show trial or a stint in Azkaban.” He let the ‘your new friend Potter’ thing slide for the time being.

“You could have tried.”

“You talked to Mother?”

“She comes most days.”

“And what does she say about my deal?” He was genuinely curious about what his mother would say behind his back.

“The one you forced on her?”

“Yes Father, the one I forced on her.” And he had, not that Draco was loathe to admit it.

“She is between our positions. She thinks you could have cut a much better deal, but unlike me she does not despise you for doing so.”

“You despise me Father?”

“Most of the time, yes. I have little else to do but think during my waking hours Draco, at least until I am shipped off to Azkaban.”

“Perhaps there is something I can do about that.” He figured it might be worth a shot anyway.

“Your mother has already tried.”

“They can’t stand Mother, but I seem to be growing on them.” He knew he would have to go cap in hand to Potter probably. He didn’t know about Harry’s Dumbledore money, so he thought that maybe a payoff might do the trick, Potter was so very practical most of the time.

“I will never declare for Potter and Scrimgeour, never.”

Well never mind then, but Draco would still try.

“Then you consign yourself to Azkaban. After your Master left you for dead in Riddle Manor, after a battle you people lost handily.”

“There was no time to police up the wounded, they had no choice.” That sentence put the ‘wish’ in wishful thinking, but Lucius was grasping.

“You would rather rot in jail than be free? Even under house arrest you could at least not have the Dementors doing Merlin knows what to you.”

Lucius had no interest in listening to any more of this, so he pretended to give up.

“Fine, try with Scrimgeour if you feel you must, I won’t object any longer.”

“I will,, there must be something else they will take instead of your incarceration.”

“Who can say with that lot. Now tell me of Hogwarts and it’s animal Headmaster.”

Funny how the shoe being on the other foot turned Draco right around on the use of that particular epithet.

“I am one of those animals Father.” Said with just the right tinge of anger.

Lucius actually looked ashamed of himself for a brief second.

“Yes you are, I forgot for a moment didn’t I. So how is Lupin as Headmaster?” He seemed more curious than contemptuous.

They spoke of Hogwarts for awhile, specifically Remus and Ravenclaw. Remus in fact was still standing there the whole time, but Draco had come to like him very much, and did not find it hard to argue Remus’ fine points to his father, who did find one good thing to say about his enemy:

“Well of course he’s smart Draco, the enemy is not totally comprised of morons after all. Lupin has an outstanding mind, I will grant him that.”

From Lucius, that was a compliment of compliments, and Remus had to marshal all of his self control not to start chuckling. Of course the elder Malfoy would have said nothing close to it if he had known that he had an audience beyond his son.

The visit only lasted an hour, and Draco promised to return the next week if he could. If his father would like him to, as he pointedly asked. Lucius’ reply was as quiet as it was heartfelt:

“Please do.”

The man did say please, and either meant it, or was just bored silly otherwise. Draco would take what he could get. Father Malfoy had one last question before Draco could open the door.

“Are you happy with your new life Draco?”

“It’s a lot less stressful Father, even with the full moon factored in. I have a lot more fun than I used to, I’ll tell you that much.”

Lucius didn’t respond, which could be taken any number of ways really. Draco held the door open long enough for Remus to leave with him, and then quietly shut it.

“Are you okay Draco?”

“I’m fine Remus, I guess.” He could get away with calling his Headmaster by his first name as long as they were alone.

“It seems like the fight’s been taken out of your father, he seemed nasty by habit more than anything.”

“I think a lifetime sentence in Azkaban will do that. I’m still struggling with why they haven’t chucked him in there with the others.”

“I don’t know, it’s hard to tell with The Minister sometimes. Are you going to try to get him out?”

“Legally, yes. Can you send a note to Potter for me?”

“I can, but I can tell you right now that he won’t help you. Not for your father.”

“I would settle for him not trying to stop me.”

“That he might go along with, it’s hard to say. He and your father really don’t get along too well.”

“No kidding, but I have to try, and if Potter is dead set against it, The Minister won’t even consider it.”

“I will see what I can do, I promise you that.”

“It’s okay Remus, I know you don’t have the influence over Potter that everyone thinks you do.”

“I sometimes wonder if I have any.” He knew right then that he should not have said that, but Draco’s chuckle was a friendly one.

“No one at Hogwarts has a lot, except for Neville perhaps, and even that is relative. No, Potter is probably past taking anyone’s advice too seriously, at least anyone’s here.”

“What makes you say that?” Remus knew that his young charge was very observant, and a different perspective could only benefit his understanding of Harry..

“Because he views you all as complicit in his muggle imprisonment for all those years. Even the Weasley parents could have done a lot more than they did to get him out, if they did anything at all besides say ‘oh please let him stay with us Albus.’ ‘No.’ ‘Okay then, if that’s what you want.’.”

This broke Remus up, as Draco did a very good Molly Weasley for someone who had only met her a few times, and hostile times at that.

“Just don’t do that in front of Ginny.”

“Where do you think I got it from? She does her mother better than I ever could.”

“I thought you lot weren’t that close?”

“We’re not, I can’t really call any of the five a ‘friend’, but she and I are usually paired up at DA meetings. Don’t get any ideas though, no sex or romance is ever going to happen between me and any of those three.” The three DOM women.

“Why not? You don’t still think that they’re beneath you, do you?”

“Granger, yes I do Remus and its not because she’s muggleborn, not really. Even I have come to learn that being muggleborn is just an accident, and not the fault of the person. It’s just that she tries too

hard, that's always why I've disliked her more than anything, she's too eager, and that rubs me the wrong way. Lovegood is just too spacey, however attractive she is, and anyone going for Ginny would have to really have a thing for her if they're to put up with that family. Why do you think Potter never tried, even when she was all but begging for it?" Very crudely put, but not altogether untrue. Draco hadn't changed totally it seemed, as the two of them flooed back to Hogwarts. This had been a private trip, off the Hogwarts radar so to speak, much like the ones that Neville took to see his parents once a month. Once a month was all he could deal with, even as they had stopped getting worse in their health.

Draco vacillated all week, and ultimately decided not to write Harry, figuring that his old rival would respect him less for any request made for Lucius Malfoy. Instead Draco wrote directly to Rufus, asking for leniency. Rufus responded with a short note saying that he would think about it, and perhaps pay a visit to Lucius himself to see if there was any chance at rehabilitation. Young Malfoy could only pray to a God he didn't believe in that his father wouldn't screw it up somehow.

Fathers and sons.

Tuesday, November 4, 1997

2:00 am

Outer Perimeter, Salem Witches Institute, 1000 meters from the Main Building

The team of 16 men and women arrived via portkey to the coordinates listed on their map. All of them were armed with wands, two in the case of one person, and brooms. They had a good plan for the assault of the building, with clear fields of fire and multiple planned diversions. Salem would go down very quickly and easily.

Or so the Senior Year Basic Combat class from Great Lakes wanted to believe.

This was their first, and only, mass duel of the term, one that each of the Senior Year Basic Combat classes from the four schools would

be doing at some point during the 1997-8 academic year: Testing the defenses of one of the other schools. Great Lakes drew Salem, going first of the classes. They were given a specific two week window during which to execute their plan, and four Aurors with which to help them, added to Ripley and the 11 students in the class. And last but not least, Salem did not know that they were coming. At all.

Well, make that two Aurors to help them, as Harry had used his connections and gotten Fred and George put on the team in lieu of a pair of Aurors, with Ripley's bemused consent. The twins needed some excitement in their lives.

The plan was mainly drawn up by Harry and Drew, with input from everyone else in the class, and a little bit from Ripley. The Aurors, Brian McCann and Jeff Francouer, were simply there as government officials, ready to calm any trigger happy Salem students or faculty. If the plan went off as scheduled and hoped, they would say little more than 'right', or 'gotcha'.

The goal of the exercise: To secure all four Houses and to bottle up the teacher wing, taking Headmaster Beau Shupe and Deputy Headmistress Cathy Corey as prisoners. Only non-violent spells were to be used, nothing in the Exploding variety, at least on other people.

Harry surveyed the Main Building of Salem, it was more like The Burrow than any magical building he had seen in America. Back in February, the Lycans had not attempted to enter Salem, they simply mortared it from afar, with the Stingers adding their own punch. Once the move to the new location was made, Shupe and his faculty decided to add a unique touch to the rebuilding. They put a couple of towers on the structure, like at Hogwarts. There was also a Japanese garden motif on the west side. Fred summed it up:

"That is the strangest looking building I have ever seen, I love it."

"Yeah Junior, why couldn't you have gone there?"

“It was fixed that way after I made my choice you gumps.” Fortunately Sophie had not heard this, and Harry still kept his voice down anyway.

“Excuses, excuses.”

“Are you two ready?”

“We were born ready, though the surrealism of this plan is not lost on us.”

“Yeah, first we help you defend your school, now we’re aiding you in attacking another one. Life with you is never boring, I’ll say that.”

“Would you rather be waking up right now, getting ready to go to work?”

“Hell no.”

“Of course not.”

“I didn’t think so, besides, you’re my crutches. I can’t fight halfway decently without you guys around.”

Fred and George were never more flattered in life, non-romantic category, than when Harry said something like that to them.

“Do the others know that you’ve rigged this whole thing?”

“Why spoil the exercise for them?” Harry thought that it was not exactly ‘rigged’, per se.

“We can’t be having that now can we?”

Everyone came over now, and Ripley looked to Harry and Drew, the leaders of the group.

“Harry, Drew, its your show.” Ripley himself would be nothing more than a soldier for this exercise. Drew addressed them.

“Now remember, the wards are only breached by landing on the ground, they don’t factor in that someone might fly, since none of our enemies are capable of it. Harry and the twins will go right through the front door, while Sophie, Professor Ripley, and I will land on the roof in the center. Reiko and Claudia will go through the East Tower, with Jack and Ray through the West Tower. Liesel, Amanda, you’re through the garden, and for the love of God don’t destroy anything you don’t have to. Eric and Harold will each take an Auror and go in through the South wall at the very last moment. Put up Silencing Charms first, and use the softest Cutting Charms that you can, minimize the damage. Once inside, go to your designated floors and put up the booby traps. Everyone have their swamps?” Nods all around, and Harry took over.

“Now remember, there will probably be a few extra wards, since they haven’t been hit, but surprise is definitely going to be on our side. They haven’t been told that they’re being hit first, it’s only the other way round. Remember, slow is smooth, smooth is fast.” That was a saying Harry had read in a military history book, meaning the line between being careful and overly cautious.

There was nothing else to say, and they all looked at their watches, just 30 more seconds as they all mounted their brooms. Drew stared at his watch, and finally gave out a quiet:

“Go.”

The teams lifted off, with Harry, Fred, and George going right through to the front door. Once they got there, George took out his tools. It was hard doing this and concentrating on keeping a hover, so Fred and Harry levitated him slightly, so that his feet did not touch the ground, which would set off the wards.

“I can’t believe that they lock this thing in the muggle fashion.” He proceeded to start picking the lock.

“Oh there are wards on it too, but we want to give them some misdirection on how we got in. Skills worth learning indeed.”

“This is a lot easier than those locks on your bedroom back on Planet Dursley.” He gave a final soft jerk, and the lock clicked open, though not the door, and he had been just sloppy enough on purpose to leave some telltale marks of what he had done. Fred put the Silencing Charm on the door, and it was just one metal door, as nondescript looking as possible. Harry then, very carefully, cut a hole in the door, just big enough for each of them to get through. They flew inside, in a tucked position because of the door, and then were able to get off their brooms. Harry then, quietly, repaired the door, so it looked like how they planned.

That was another problem with the wards as currently constructed, and had been a problem with the Lycan invasion:

The wards were pretty useless once the intruders got inside. Especially if the intruders were magical, as the wards needed to be designed not to harm some 14 year old kid with insomnia who was wandering around. Harry took out his map of the place, and pointed at the faculty office row on the third floor, Headmaster Shupe’s office. Faculty offices were unmarked except for a number on the door, so it really helped to know the number of the office that you were heading to. These three, and these three alone, knew.

“There’s our target, let’s move. Make sure you booby trap the stairwell like we talked about.”

“Don’t worry about us Junior.”

The Salem map had come from their inside person, the only one at the school that any of them knew:

Jessica Murray, daughter of the Great Lakes Headmistress, and more importantly, WWW employee number 10. As soon as Harry had found out the target, he had sent a message to her, asking very nicely for some help. It turned out that Jessica had a Ginny-style crush on her employer, and readily provided a map of the faculty floor

and of the student floors as well. Dobby had done the rest, taking some time to wander around after his last delivery. Hence the 'rigged' comment, though only the WWW three knew about it, not even Sophie had been told.

"Dobby."

"Yes Harry?"

"You have your gear?"

"I do." Dobby's gear was a bag filled with spell grenades, Harry managed to tap every single one of them with his wand, which activated the timers, set for one minute.

"Then please go, I'll call for you later when everything is in place."

"Right Harry, be careful."

"You too." He meant it too, for Dobby's target was the house elf dorm down in the sub-basement. The house elves at the American schools mostly did a day-evening schedule. They cleaned the dorm rooms during the day, while the students were in class or eating meals, and they worked on the classrooms in the evening time, when they would of course not be occupied. This was totally unlike Hogwarts, where the elves did pretty much everything, aside from food related things, after the stroke of midnight and before 7:00 am.

He popped into the middle of the dormitory and released the racquet balls, allowing them to roll in all directions. He quickly popped away, and a few seconds later, a series of:

"Frofundo!"

It was an experimental spell that Robert Marr had gotten a hold of for Harry. It was basically a Sleeping Spell that only affected house elves. It had worked on both Dobby and Winky, and while Harry was a little squirrely about the scale that they were trying, he felt it was their best

shot to avoid any of the house elves warning any of the ones they were about to attack. Well, sort of attack.

Meanwhile, the other teams were entering the building undetected, aside from Eric Liddell, Harold Abrahams, and their Auror friends, who were waiting outside for everyone to get into position. They were to be the diversion, the attention getter.

The tower teams got in the easiest, the towers themselves being rigged with Slippery Charms to discourage any Lycan or Kindred who was game to try some rappelling, but otherwise the 20 meter high towers were not warded in any meaningful way. Drew, Sophie, and Ripley got through the one hole in the rooftop defenses: the air vent, though not before riddling the roof with WWW swamps. An Enlarging Charm later, and they were sliding through to the middle of the Proctor Lounge, Proctor being the one House name the two schools shared.

No one was awake, thankfully, and the layout seemed to be just like at Great Lakes: A large Lounge with double doors leading off to the dorm rooms. Drew, silently thanking God for utilitarianism, motioned for Ripley to rig the doors to the dorm rooms, and its hallway. Sophie went to the locked breaker box and picked it open.

It seems that the twins had taught her more than just how to make some pranks, and she was arguably faster at it than either of them were. Not that they would ever admit that out loud to anyone, even Harry.

She got it open and stood by while Drew readied the blue mist, to be placed at the dorm room doors and the Lounge door itself, once his teacher was done with his work. Ripley was placing a swamp right at the dorm room corridor, following the one he had put halfway through. He put up some mist as well, both his and Drew's were timed to last 30 minutes, and Finite Incantatem would only work this time if it was the spell caster who did it. Ripley looked at his students, and said very quietly:

"I'm good." Ripley went over to Sophie at the breaker box.

Drew put up the mist, no one was getting out of this Lounge.

“So am I, Sophie go ahead and rig the box.”

The rigging of the breaker box included a nice little Movement Charm that Harry had found in one of his more obscure books a month or so back, while he had been trolling for something else. The charm was set to move the breaker switches from on to off after a time delay, in this case ten minutes. Mastering it had taken Sophie no small amount of practice, but soon enough she had become expert in it, just in time for this morning's exercise.

Aside from the rigging of the breaker box, this part of plan was being repeated in the Houses of Carnegie, Powhatan, and Attucks by the other three squads. The nine of them proceeded down to the second floor, the classroom level. The doors there were unlocked of course, and it only took about 10 minutes to booby trap the classrooms, just in case any of the teachers wanted out the hard way.

The plan was only 15 minutes in now, as Harry and the twins took their positions. He had looked at them minutes earlier:

“You guys know what to do.”

“Oh this is going to be chaos personified.”

“You think Remus would let us try a raid like this at Hogwarts?”

“Yes it is, and bloody hell no he wouldn't. I'm still going to ask him though. Get going.” Personally, Harry would be willing to donate 100,000 galleons to the charity of Remus' choice if his parents' friend would let them do something like this. Remus would eventually turn down such an offer, chuckling all the while he wrote the declining note.

Harry himself took up position in the hallway area directly between the offices/abodes of Headmaster Beau Shupe, Harry's colleague from the school defense commission, and Deputy Headmistress Cathy Corey, who was not a fan of Joanne Murray as it turned out.

She had been the runner-up for the Great Lakes job, and seemed to be currently stuck in her position. In more ways than one after they got through with this hallway.

Fred and George were on each side, trailing detonating wire along, attaching it to the doorways. The wire would not rig muggle explosives, but rather a variation on the spell grenade that they had worked up. It was a more advanced version, and this one held a Banshee Charm. They had gotten the idea from the booby traps that Tony Almeida, still at large, and his Lycan soldiers had laid in the Great Lakes stairwells. They got done in short order, at roughly the same time the four squads one floor below were completing their work.

“I can’t believe these people still don’t know we’re here.”

“Maybe they hoped some other school, one without The Boy Who Lived, would get them.”

“I still say this is going too easily, they can’t be this incompetent can they?”

“You two are so funny.” Harry thought that Shupe seemed competent enough, but knew that saying this wouldn’t do any good right now.

“Just get on the horn, as the muggles like to say.”

“Yes Dad. Dobby.” Said just loud enough for the magic to take hold and bring Dobby to him.

“Yes Harry, are you prepared?” Dobby was fully briefed on the operation, and had even made a few suggestions.

“We are, go down one level and see if Drew and the others are ready.”

“Right Harry.”

He was back in seconds.

“One more minute they say.”

Harry counted down the minute in his head.

“Okay, tell them to get ready for the fireworks. Then go and tell Eric and Harold to count to 20, then blast their way inside.”

“Got it Harry.”

“Winky”

Now was Winky’s small part to play, as she popped in.

“Yes Harry?”

“As soon as you hear the explosions, go in to the Headmaster’s quarters and give him this message: Joanne Murray sends her regards.” He had almost told her to say that Harry Potter sent them, but that was just a hair too arrogant for his tastes. Not to mention that a large portion of the plan was Drew’s. This message would tell Shupe that it wasn’t actually the Lycans breaking the peace and coming to settle some old business.

“Yes Harry.” Winky, unlike her mate, seemed pretty eager for the fireworks to start.

The WWW three looked at each other for a second, as they took out their wands for the first time in awhile. Harry proceeded to eliminate Jessica’s map, via Incendio, though he did have a copy back in his trunk. He didn’t want any blowback to fall on her in the unlikely event that Great Lakes lost this little contest.

“Are we sure that these people are not going to try to kill us Harry?”

“They’re not supposed to, but the stress of the event and all.”

“You really suck at this reassuring stuff, you know that don’t you?”

“In point of fact I do Fred.”

“One day Junior, one day we’re going to find out how you do that, how you can tell us apart. You don’t have anything planted on us?” He had asked this many times before, and gotten the same answer. Well some of the same answer:

“No, but Dobby does. I can’t see it, only elves can.” He could see realization dawning on his partners.

“That explains a lot.”

The humorous byplay was cut short by the sounds of a series of very loud explosions on the outer wall, as the WWW three all put in magically enhanced ear plugs in anticipation of the show. Aurors Francouer and McCann had been instructed to add Volume Enhancers to the Abrumpere explosion spells used by Eric and Harold. The two of them were using all of their power as well, as they followed up the Abrumpere barrage with a series of Earthquake Spells, the same that Harry used in the Olympic obstacle course, and the building literally shook, as the wards went haywire. It had been the noise that set them off, not the actual destruction:

“WARNING! WARNING! THE BUILDING HAS BEEN BREACHED! WARNING! WARNING!” This message would repeat every 10 seconds until shut off.

Shupe soon got on the horn from inside his office:

“Attention all students and faculty, the school is under attack by persons unknown! This is a drill! I repeat, the school is under attack by persons unknown, this is a drill!”

The teachers, all but six of whom lived in their offices/abodes, then began to open their doors, setting off the grenades.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!"

Multiplied by 15 as that number of doors were opened within a second of each other. Even with earplugs in, the WWW three had to grit their teeth and bear some pain. The Salem faculty did not stand a chance, as the sheer power of the Banshee cry put them on their knees.

Oh, and made them completely and utterly vulnerable to the four wands that took aim at them. A series of stunners put them down for the count. All but Shupe and Corey, as Harry pointed to Corey's door and motioned for the twins to get in there.

"With pleasure." Or so Fred mouthed to Harry.

They blasted through the door, unleashing another Banshee Charm that knocked Corey flat on her back. It turned out that she had just taken a moment to get dressed, not really taking the drill seriously. Only she was not totally dressed yet, and the twins got a show from the 41 year old Corey, who was not unattractive. Not that they wanted a show of course, but when you literally blast open a woman's door at 2:20 in the morning, you're going to see some things.

Harry did the same to Shupe's door, the Banshee cry made the man put his hands over his ears in pain, he had been floo calling his six absent teachers. And yes, he was fully dressed.

"Accio Wand!"

Shupe's wand flew into Harry's hand, and Harry immediately sent some magical ropes flying the Headmaster's way, wrapping him up tight and putting him on the floor.

"Hi there Beau."

Meanwhile, in Proctor House, the Basic Combat students there all tried to leave their dorm rooms, to rush to the planned defenses.....but they never got there, as the swamps were deployed all along their route, and the mist prevented anyone from being levitated. A couple of them tried to crawl through the muck, but

Sophie's Movement Charms had tripped the breakers just like they were supposed to, making it pitch black. It's hard to crawl through a swamp and do Lumos at the same time, as these kids found out to their detriment.

It was similar in the other three Houses, though the circuit breakers there had been tripped manually, which did alert a few students who either happened to wake up while the lights were out, or one couple who was doing the wild thing. All of them, though, just figured that the elves would fix it in a bit as they always did, and thought nothing more about it.

Until all hell broke loose that is.

Not one student got so much as into his or her Lounge before Shupe gave the all clear, a total victory for the invading forces of Great Lakes.

Back to present:

"Hi there Beau."

"I should have known it would be you, just my luck." Shupe was smiling though, he knew that he had been destroyed by the best available. It was somewhat comforting to know that he had been outfoxed by someone who had actually walked the walk in real life.

"Did we just avoid your wards, or did you not have many up, that's my question."

"Probably both, I had heard rumors that Tecumseh was the first to be hit, not us. I plead guilty to the crime of complacency." Shupe in fact had delegated the task of setting up the defenses, and was ruing that decision right about now.

"Too bad you can't try for any revenge on us." Part of the deal was that you did not hit the school that hit you. In fact Salem would be

third up, going after Pathfinder come February, they would have a lot of fun going up those mountains in Winter.

“I don’t even want to know what you’ll be doing to those poor kids from Pathfinder or Tecumseh. Hang on, yes I do.”

“I’ll tell you at the next Commission meeting, I’m sure we’ll start gaming things out this morning.” Class was less than eight hours away for the Great Lakes group, though Ripley had assured them that it would only be the after action report for this exercise, and some idea gathering for their own defense.

“I can’t wait. Can you untie me now? I need to give the all clear. And what did you do to Cathy?”

“The twins are handling her.”

“I can imagine. At least I’ll get a chance to finally meet them.” He had heard all about them from Jessica Murray, and Harry at their commission meetings, which were a couple hours out of Harry’s Sunday afternoons, once a month.

Harry undid the ropes and gave Shupe his wand back. But not before:

“Actually Beau, you never did say that you surrendered.”

“Noticed that did you.” Shupe would have snapped his fingers if that were physically possible at the moment.

“You played it nicely though, I was just seconds away from letting you go.”

“I hereby surrender Salem Witches Institute to my old friend Joanne Murray, and her top student.”

“I’m the top Defense and Wandless student, but that’s it. I accept your surrender.” He untied the man and actually did give his wand back. Shupe put it to his throat.

“The drill is now over! I repeat, the drill is now over! The Great Lakes Magical Institute has won this round and taken control of the school. All students will return to their rooms now if you have not already. Again, the drill is over! All Seventh Year Basic Combat students and both Defense teachers are to report to my office as soon as you are physically able to.” Salem aped Hogwarts in their Year references, though all three of the other American schools did theirs the same, the Great Lakes way, Harry’s school being second in longevity.

Harry got a nice chuckle out of that last bit, and he and Shupe went out into the hallway, where the Salem man saw most of his faculty lying prone on the ground, courtesy of more than one Stupefy.

“Feel free to start cursing inappropriately Beau, my tender ears can handle it.”

Shupe did just that, though he was still smiling, and Harry learned a few new combinations. Harry put his own wand to his throat.

“Great Lakes team, this is Harry Potter. You are directed to go upstairs and undo your handiwork. Then report to the third floor immediately afterward.”

“How much handiwork needs to be undone?”

“Quite a bit, we erred on the side of caution.”

Just then the twins came out, wands pointed at a very pissed off Cathy Corey, who had been half dressed when she had gotten stunned, and was not happy about a pair of 19 year olds seeing her like that, however straitlaced the twins actually were.

“Beau, tell these two to put their wands down.”

Shupe didn't get a chance to answer her before George interrupted things:

"Look lady, we don't answer to him or anyone else here except Harry, and then only on things like this. Second, you were pretty liberal with those threats back in there, so either calmly the bloody hell down, or we'll stun you again. Comprene?"

Beau Shupe wanted nothing more than to start laughing his just now awake ass off, but he knew that it would only cause problems for him later on. He could tell that he was going to like Fred and George though.

"Cathy, stand down please. Fred and George Weasley I presume?"

"We are, you must be Headmaster Shupe. Harry says nice things about you, which is the only reason she's standing on her own two feet right now." Corey bristled again, but she'd heard enough about Harry to know not to mess with him or his partners.

The three of them shook hands, as Eric, Harold, and their Auror friends were the first to join the group, not having any handiwork to undo. Shupe knew McCann pretty well, having worked in the same Boston office with him before the younger man's transfer to Milwaukee.

"Well Brian, I wish I could say it's nice to see you again." They shook hands.

"I'm sorry Beau, but the plan was just too good. Harry and Drew are tactical geniuses, what can I say?"

"You had nothing to do with it?"

"I followed orders, if that's what you mean. I'm told that Tom barely had any input either." Eric had told him that, and Harry was nodding.....all the while eying a still seething Deputy Headmistress. Quite the temper there.

Within three more minutes, the rest of the Great Lakes group was there, and Ripley immediately started ragging on Shupe, his old colleague.

“You really need to get yourself some Brits over here Beau, they make quite the difference.”

“So I’ve been noticing. Was there any permanent damage done?”

“Nope, just a lot of swamp cleanup. The only physical damage we did was by Eric and Harold here, but that was only to get your attention anyway.” Eric and Harold had pointedly volunteered for that part of the mission, they liked to destroy things it seemed, and theirs was supposed to be the only offensive part of the show, aside from Harry, Fred, and George. Those three were the only ones to use their wands on any actual people.

It was another five minutes before the nine members of Seventh Year Basic Combat arrived. Scourgify had done the trick, though they were all still in their pajamas. Introductions were made all around, as none of the kids had met each other before. There was a slight sense of ‘sizing up’ going on, at least an undercurrent of it, as these 20 students would all be front and center at the four-school Olympics in June. Harry in particular was given the thrice over by all of the Salem folk.

The junior Defense teacher at Salem was a 33 year old African-American man named Raymond Parker, who Harry knew pretty well from the Commission, the two of them being it’s youngest members. Ray had not been there for the Banshee part of the exercise, as he had young children who were not allowed to live at Great Lakes, so he kept an off campus house in Amherst. He and the senior teacher, Joe Jackson, did not get along that well, so he was very pleased at his rival’s comeuppance. He, Harry, and the twins went to a corner of the office.

“Nice work guys, very nice work. You used Joanne’s daughter I assume?”

Stone silence for a second, as Parker quickly held up his hands.

“Hey, she was an asset, and one you hired long before this kind of thing came around. You think we wouldn’t have used her if we had drawn Great Lakes?” Head Auror Mike Jacobson was the one who made the draw, and he would tell Harry later that there was no way he would have assigned Great Lakes to be Salem’s target, because of the position it would have put Jessica Murray in. He didn’t know that Harry had her on the payroll though, he wasn’t that up on campus events at his old school.

“Just make sure no one gives her a hard time about what she may or may not have done.”

“Everyone likes Jessica, no worries Harry.” He made a mental note to keep a closer eye on her, just in case.

“Is this going to help you with that git Jackson?” Shupe, for reasons that only he really understood, did nothing to discourage rivalries amongst his faculty members. Having heard only Ray’s side of the argument, Harry just assumed that the Headmaster allowed it for amusement purposes.

“It sure won’t hurt, I had nothing to do with the non-planning that went on. He and Corey were the ones in charge of it all.” Upon hearing that, the twins both got huge grins on their faces.

“That was all we needed to hear Ray. Is she always like that?”

“She’s very intense, let’s put it that way. Look, is there any shot of us getting some Pathfinder or Tecumseh intelligence from you when it’s our shot? You have something set up at Pathfinder by now don’t you?” For WWW he meant, Ray was a shop customer through Jessica.

“We do, but only in the last month. My solicitor’s wife’s second cousin, Sarah Hoerauf. She’s a Sophomore over there and seems to be taking to it.”

“Your solicitor’s wife’s second cousin. That’s quite a close connection.”

“It’s all about having a large network I guess. And yeah, we’ll get the layout and such for you, no problem, though Tecumseh would be a lot easier than Pathfinder, since the layout there is exactly the same as it is at Great Lakes.” Harry liked Ray and wanted to help him out if he could. They chatted a bit about Hogwarts related issues for a time, before Shupe called everyone together and herded them toward the staff Lounge. Upon settling in there, the Great Lakes group, with Drew as their spokesman, outlined their plan. Leaving out Jessica of course, and the lock picking. And the Sleeping Spell for the house elves. Not much else really. Joe Jackson, the oldest Defense teacher at the four schools, did in fact have a chagrined look on his face at the end.

“I have to say that I am very impressed. One thing though, I would have assumed a full frontal assault, based on Harry’s battle history.” All eyes turned to Harry, who managed not to say how stupid that sounded.

“All that would have done was trip what wards you had up, and alert you to our presence. When the Lycans attacked our school that’s what they did, and we managed to stop them for the most part, because we had just enough warning. Drew and I felt that stealth and surprise was wisest. You only knew that we were here because we told you.” A bit harsh perhaps, and Harry chose not to point out that Salem had no idea who would be attacking them, so his personal battle history was neither here nor there. Jackson did have one more question.

“Why bring your partners instead of another pair of Aurors?”

“I don’t know. Fred, George, why did we bring you along?”

“We’re the comic relief.”

All the Great Lakes people were nodding, they all loved Fred and George. Even Ripley, who had been forced to listen to his colleague

Dick Greenleaf brag about how the twins were wiping the floor with the rest of the class in Regular Defense.

“Besides, we never got a chance for this Basic Combat stuff, Hogwarts not taking Defense seriously until after we left, so we weren’t trained up. Just trying to relive some of our misspent youth and all that.”

Corey and Jackson were looking at the twins like they were crazy, but both seemed willingly to acknowledge that as the coaches of the last place team here, they did not have a leg to stand on.

Soon the jumbo size meeting broke up, the Great Lakes people collected their brooms and took the portkey ride home. Once at the Athletic Field, Ripley stopped them for a second.

“Okay guys, you have two options here: Option A: go to school, and then to bed, with a review class at 10 am; Option B: go to school, go to a quick 45 minute review and planning session, then no class at all in the morning.”

Everyone seemed to agree that being able to sleep in was the ideal, so they repaired to Defense Classroom A, where it was quickly agreed that it was hard to really critique the battle plan, since Salem barely put up any kind of prepared defense. The rest of the time was spent brainstorming about ideas for the defense of Great Lakes. A lot of interesting, and borderline felonious, ideas were chucked out there, and it was quickly agreed that Professor Murray should be invited to the next class, so that she could pass judgment on the assortment of booby traps that they had come up with.

Still, everyone was giddy with victory, and with the added knowledge that they had taken down the flagship school in the bargain. This had been a good day, even if it was only three and a half hours old when they went to bed.

Saturday, November 8, 1998

Harry’s trunk

10:00 am

Sophie and Harry were still abed, sleeping thank goodness, when the trunk floo fired, disgorging the twins in turn. To say that they were not pleased with their partner still being asleep is one of life's understatements.

"What the hell are they doing still sleeping?"

"Do we really want to speculate on that right now Fred?"

"Point taken. Um.....lovebirds!" Said kind of loudly, and enough to waken Sophie, the lighter sleeper of the two. She stared at the twins for a second, as if working out just who they were.

"This had better be a nightmare."

"Sorry Sophie darling, but we genuinely thought you two would be up by now." George seemed somewhat sincere, though Fred had something important to add:

"Please tell us that you're both wearing pajamas?" That got Harry awake, and he groggily looked at his partners.

"This had better be one of Sophie's nightmares."

"What did we tell you lot about the funny shtick. That's ours. Anyway, there has been a slight development, and we wanted to tell you about it."

"So why don't you two get, well, decent, and we'll go sit in the other room. No hanky panky though, we have tender ears." Fred just managed to dodge the wandless Repulsar that Harry blearily threw at his stomach, and the twins exited the room. Which was good, because neither Sophie nor Harry had much of anything on. They took a moment to actually put on some PJ's, and then joined the twins.

“A slight development you said?”

“Well this is not about the war, we should make that plain right now. But it will involve some violence at some point, we just have not decided when.”

“Ron or Ginny?”

The twins just stood there looking half irritated, half impressed.

“How does he do that Fred?”

“I have no idea George, but it’s starting to freak me out. Yes Junior, it’s about Ginny. She and Dean are no longer.”

Well that was what Harry had figured, but he was still wondering why had to be woken up about it. He decided to let the twins tell it their own way though.

“Uh oh. What happened?”

“She caught him with Lavender Brown in an empty classroom while on Prefect rounds, and they were more than just snogging apparently.” Sophie, predictably, looked the most outraged, though her man was not too far behind.

“Oh dear. Are they alive still?”

“Yes they are, but only because whichever Creevey is a Prefect wouldn’t let her kill them right there. He gave them each a detention for shagging in public and somehow got Ginny away before total carnage.” Fred and George had never had a whole lot of respect for Colin Creevey before this, DA membership notwithstanding, but anyone who could stop Ginny from murder in this situation was now in their cool book.

“And after that?” This was where he figured the violence would come up.

“Well not a whole lot really. Dean flat out told everyone who would listen that Ginny wouldn’t shag him and Lavender will, and that was that. Lovely bloke he turned out to be eh? I guess this had been going on for quite awhile, his pressuring our baby sister to go further than she wanted to, Ginny just didn’t tell us about it. Shockingly enough after things fell apart, Ginny took the high road and let public opinion side with her, and it did.”

“When did all this happen? Not today?”

“Last night. We got an express note from Ron, via Pig, explaining the situation and all but demanding that we fire Dean, and Seamus too. Ron and Ginny still aren’t best friends, but he’s standing shoulder to shoulder with her here. Hermione sent one along as well, which is where we got all this detail.” It had seemed like more information than Ron would impart.

“What else did Ron do?”

“Nothing, your close personal friend Minerva threatened him up and down if he retaliated, saying it was none of his business, brother or not. She did seem to imply that it was Ginny’s business, and I’m sure she will be borrowing the Map any second now from Neville, if she hasn’t already.”

“Are you going to fire the two of them? How easy would they be to replace?”

“Well that’s why we’re here, because decisions have to be made Harry, and right quickly. But yeah, Fred and I see no viable alternative to firing Dean and Seamus. Leaving aside that Ginny would disembowel all three of us if we don’t, we just cannot trust that Dean, at the very least, would not sabotage his work in revenge for whatever barbarity that Ginny is going to do to him. The two of them do 2/3 of our Hogwarts manufacturing, Neville and Luna doing the rest, and that’s just too much to risk.” The Hogwarts manufacturing was about half the total, with the twins themselves and Winky doing the remainder.

“I agree, they have to go. Should I start the Howler campaign again?” He looked over at Sophie, whom he could tell was already writing out the script in her head, being fully on Ginny’s side along with everyone else in the room. Um, not so fast there Sophie:

“Rumor has it that Remus is going to take a page from the Great Lakes book and ban students from getting them. You can try though, it’s a nice business move, but get it up and running today if you can.” Both twins were nodding, the American business had really exploded the last time Harry got revenge minded on Hogwarts folk, and this would not be in violation of the Dumbledore deal.

“Maybe we should wait until she does something first, she deserves the opening round anyway.”

“Good point Junior. Now on to replacements, George and I have an idea, but we’re not sure if you’re going to like it.”

“Go ahead and hire the Creeveys if you want to, makes no never mind to me.”

“HOW THE HELL DO YOU DO THAT!?”

He was laughing after he said it though, along with his twin and Sophie.

“Breathe George, breathe. Thank goodness that this trunk is soundproof. C’mon, Colin worships Ginny from, well not afar, and he and Dennis are both smart enough to do the work and not blow themselves up. They’re core DA members so they’re loyal. Just logic brother, logic.”

“So we’re unanimous?”

“Yes we are, make the offer.”

“Good, and once Christmas Break rolls around we will get our revenge on Dean, bastard.”

“I kind of feel sorry for him actually.” Mouths were agape on all people without scars on their foreheads.

“Care to explain that Junior?”

“I mean that the three of us have six weeks to plan our revenge. Wouldn’t want to be him, with us having that kind of time to plot.” Mouths were no longer agape, and were turned into smiles.

“We have taught you so very well.”

“Yes you have.”

The twins soon left, and Harry and Sophie got dressed, wandering out into the main dorm room. The spare trunk was in Sophie’s dorm room, so usually she just ‘went underground’ as it were. Before they left, she had a thought.

“I say we turn on the Howler campaign now, by the time anything really happens with it, Ginny will have struck.”

“Sounds like a plan, but I have one twist on it.”

Of course you do, thought Sophie with vast amusement.

“I’ll let you surprise me. What do you think she’ll do?”

“If it was Dumbledore as Headmaster I’d bet you a shiny nickel that Ginny wouldn’t do much of anything, she would just let us have free reign and sit there looking smug and innocent at the same time. The old codger couldn’t punish her because she didn’t do anything, while knowing that the twins and I are out of his reach, so to speak.”

“So with Remus as the Head of the school she might be willing to go out on the ledge a bit further?”

“That’s my theory and I’m sticking to it.”

“Are you going to try to couple her with Jonas now? You and your coupling up craze.”

“Me? Marie was not my idea, nor really was Claudia and Lee, that was the twins. Now it’s more convenient, yes, I’ll grant you that. Dobby!” Harry really didn’t want to get into any of that at present, but he did like the idea of Jonas and Ginny a lot better than Draco and Ginny, that was for sure.

The wee man made his appearance.

“Yes Harry?”

“I would like you to go to Hogwarts and shadow Ginny for the rest of the day.” He gave a brief explanation of the circumstances.

“To what end Harry? Am I to prevent her from doing something?” Excellent question.

“Well don’t let her kill him, that’s for sure. No, I just want a firsthand, unbiased report. You don’t have to appear visible if you don’t want to, you don’t even need to let Ginny you’re there, totally up to you.”

Now that Dumbledore had been sacked, Dobby did not mind going to Hogwarts quite as much as he used to, but this time he fully intended to take advantage of the ‘totally up to you’ part of Harry’s instructions.

“Okay Harry, I will go now, I will make my report once they have gone to bed at Hogwarts. Or if something horrible happens, whichever comes first.” Well that was reassuring.

“Thank you Dobby.”

Dobby took his leave, and Sophie looked at Harry dubiously.

“You don’t really think she would do something too outrageous do you?”

“If I was stupid enough to cheat on you, and even more stupid enough to get caught, what would you do to me?”

“Fair point, and I’m rather tame compared to the stories I’ve heard about her. What did she do to that Michael Corner guy after they broke up?”

“Nothing really, since she’s the one who broke it off. I don’t think you’re allowed to get revenge if you’re the one who breaks things off.”

“Says the man with one girlfriend on his resume.”

“Let’s keep it that way if you don’t mind.” They were in agreement on that, very easily. Besides, Harry was Sophie’s first boyfriend too.

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

They wandered into the Lounge and found an Indiana Jones marathon going on, courtesy of the Novices, it was their day to control the televisions. The two of them joined Marty and watched the rest of The Last Crusade, which was Sophie’s favorite movie of the three. Harry resisted temptation to see what Marty thought of all the drama, he wasn’t sure how ‘advanced’ Marty’s theoretical knowledge of sex was and sure didn’t want to be the one to have to explain it to him. That would be up to either Warrick, or Josiah Coyle, Marty’s father.

Once they got to lunch though, the plan was abandoned, as Harry filled the gang in on what he wanted to do. Right before dessert, he stood up. He didn’t put his wand to his throat, he just yelled.

“Can I have everyone’s attention please!” The room quickly quieted down, as if knowing this would be good. Except for Murray, who just closed her eyes and prayed that it wouldn’t be too ‘out there’.

“I would like to announce that my Howler campaign is being re-opened for today, and today only. And I’m sorry boys and men, but today is ladies day only. My close friend Ginny Weasley was cheated on by her boyfriend yesterday. She would not do certain physical things with him, and so he tried to have it both ways. He was caught, very much in the act. Now Ginny is taking the high road for the time being, her ex is not dead, at least not until the twins and I get our hands on him. But I don’t need to take the high road, and I would like the women of Great Lakes to send him a message, or a Howler, saying that what he did is not acceptable! Anyone who would like to help me, will get a free Talking Tattoo in compensation, and I should add that faculty Howlers would be gratefully accepted as well. I will be in the Cortez Lounge after lunch and all afternoon. Thank you.”

A buzz immediately stirred around the room, as more than a few girls came up to Harry with variations on this question:

“Is there a script? Or can we make up what we want to say?” There would be a whole lot of venting going on, Harry could tell already. Of course that was one reason he had chosen a ‘ladies only’ approach in the first place.

“No script, and you can say anything you want as long as it doesn’t involve profanity or threats of castration.” They didn’t like that last part, but it did look as though Dean would be getting some Great Lakes based flack.

Oh did he ever.

Great Lakes Magical Institute currently housed 174 female students and a dozen or so female faculty members. Dean received 167 Howlers, and it was only that few because Harry drew the line at having them doing more than one. Harry wound up spending over 300 galleons on Talking Tattoos, but he felt it was worth every one of them as the red envelopes piled up in front of him in the Cortez Lounge. A lot of the girls had to go to their rooms to make theirs, so that the Howlers wouldn’t get background noise from others doing it. It should also be noted that while Professor Murray made a point of saying that she approved of the revenge, she did not contribute a

Howler. 'Wouldn't be cricket' for a Head of school to torment a student at another school, or so she said. There was some static though:

More than a few guys came up to Harry and immediately started bitching that he was giving their girlfriends ideas. Sitting next to Harry, doing the record keeping, Drew felt free to answer for him:

"Well don't cheat on them and you'll be just fine, right?"

No one had a good response to that response, and only about a dozen guys came up to them anyway. Harry had told Winky that she would be making a mass delivery later in the day, but when she saw the stack of envelopes she nearly choked.

"You can carry all these, right Winky?"

Winky was shy most of the time, but this time she looked at Harry like he was an imbecile that she was putting up with out of the goodness of her heart.

"I will be fine Harry. I am to deliver these to the twins?"

"Right, then they'll post them, ready for breakfast tomorrow. You and Dobby will be there for that, I want some more firsthand knowledge of how they play." He had not done this a year ago, much to his later regret, though the DOM's had all shown them pensieve memories. An hour later, Dobby came back from his Hogwarts duty.

"Nothing has happened so far Harry, the McGonagall woman has threatened 10 detentions for any incident, and Ron and Dean are just giving each other hostile glances. Neville is taking Ron's side, and Seamus is taking Dean's, though I overheard Seamus telling Parvati that he thinks Dean is wrong, but a mate backs a mate. Whatever that means." So far so good.

"And what has Ginny done?"

“Nothing overt, other than speaking with Luna a lot, she is avoiding Hermione.”

“Don’t tell me that Hermione is.....” But Dobby did not let him finish, holding up his hands to forestall a rant.

“No, she is as mad at Dean as anyone. She just assumes that you and the twins will get enough revenge for all of them, without the risk of detention.” Typical Hermione, though Ginny was not so sure apparently.

“Did you ever show yourself? This is a lot of good stuff Dobby.”

“No Sophie, I just tagged along with Ginny and Hermione, I assumed that most everyone would talk to one or the other of them. No one knew that I was there, I felt people would act more naturally if they knew that what they said was not going to be reported to all of you here. And I followed Dean for a little while too, he does not feel as though he did anything wrong.” And that last little bit of hubris firmly decided Harry on sending the Howlers, there was still time to call them back if he had wanted to.

He told Dobby the plan for the morning in Britain, and the wee man went off for some kip, tomorrow might be a long day.

Sunday, November 9, 1997

Hogwarts Great Hall

Noon GMT

Well it was a long day for Dean, that’s for sure. Very few students ate breakfast at Hogwarts on Sunday mornings, so mail call was always at lunchtime. None of the DOM’s officially knew that something was happening, or even unofficially as Dobby had not shown himself.

But they knew that there would be a response, the only questions were ‘when’ and ‘how’. Ginny was looking up every minute or so,

waiting for the mail. She was sitting with Ron, Hermione, and Neville, while Dean and company were further down, with plenty of folk in between them. Dean was somewhat relaxed now, figuring that if Ginny was going to do something, it would have happened by now.

Then the mail came.

It took a fleet of owls, 30 in all, to deliver all of the red envelopes, and soon enough Dean's remaining friends had to scoot over so that the Howlers didn't get into their food. He didn't even bother counting them, he just looked plaintively at Remus and McGonagall, sitting together at the staff table.

Not that it helped much. Remus was openly laughing at the spectacle, while his Deputy just looked at Dean with a contempt that only a woman who had been in Ginny's shoes in the past could deliver. No other teachers seemed willing to lend a hand, all of them echoing what Shepherd would later tell Dean:

"I'm curious as to what you expected Dean? However right you think you were, you didn't realize that Ginny's family, who were also your employers if I remember right, would take this a little personally?"

Dean could be heard to protest that position whenever anyone would give him the time of day. That is, when his hearing returned to normal, which took a few hours. Howlers, once delivered, must be opened within five minutes or bad things happen. Dean did not realize this until about halfway through the five minutes, and there was no way on earth he was going to be able to open 167 envelopes in as many seconds. A very alert Neville immediately threw up a Silencing Bubble around Dean, and he loudly suggested that everyone near Dean do the same, just in case.

But a Bubble like that only keeps out so much, and if Dean were a muggle he would have been made permanently deaf by the noise. The sounds of 167 females, ranging from 11 year olds like Keisha to 73 year old Staff Secretary Dolores Landingham, assaulted him with accusations of disrespecting women, being a cheater and a liar, and being a hypocrite.....though no one was sure what they meant by that last one. The cacophony was amazing, and would be talked

about at Hogwarts for many years. Dobby would later tell the gang that he had never seen a human being looked so terrorized, and this was an elf who had seen Cruciatus performed on more than one occasion while being employed at Malfoy Manor.

Ginny just leaned forward, rested her chin in her hands, and smiled. It was the smile of someone who was enjoying the chaos being created, someone who was feeling a lot better because of it.

Someone who had had nothing to do with the creation of said chaos.

Dean would try to claim otherwise, but Ginny would have none of it, telling Remus later that afternoon:

“Put me under Veritaserum if you want to, but I did not ask Harry to do this, or the twins, or anyone else.”

“You just figured they would do something.” Not a question, but a statement.

“I have had no contact with anyone outside of Hogwarts since that bastard cheated on me, either directly or indirectly.” That didn’t answer the question of course, but it’s not like assuming someone would do something was against the rules.

Remus assured Ginny that he believed her, and immediately banned all Howlers from Hogwarts until further notice. Or until Luna and Ginny graduated and Harry had no reason to get involved in Hogwarts affairs, not that he shared this particular reason with anyone beyond the faculty. He sent a brief note to Harry, via Fred and George:

Dear Harry,

While I understand your interest and admire your loyalty, please don’t do that again. You couldn’t have waited until Christmas Break?

Always your friend,

Remus

Perfect Remus, and Harry admired the tone of the note.

Dear Remus,

Oh I will be making an example of Dean during Christmas Break too. I know you can't participate, Dean being your student and all, but I'll make sure you are informed when it happens. I'll leave him alone at Hogwarts though, unless something else happens.

Your fellow Marauder,

Harry

The note satisfied Remus, and ultimately he figured that Dean had suffered enough, so he kept the punishment at one detention for each of them, with a warning to be more careful next time. Surprisingly enough, Lavender received very little blame from anyone in this matter. Ginny felt that if Lavender wanted to be stuck with a guy who would cheat on his girlfriend of over a year, then that was her lookout. The rest of the Hogwarts females thought much the same, and thankfully Lavender kept a low profile, not bragging about any prowess Dean might have.

Ron chose to stay away from Dean for the most part, but he wrote another note to the twins, via Pig, insisting on being let in on any Christmas plans for revenge, since he had missed out on the Howler fun. They wrote back that they would think about it, and let him know. And they also warned him to be careful, once Dean recovered his hearing fully, he might go after Ron in revenge. Dean didn't really have the stones for something like that, and things were somewhat calm for the rest of the term between them. Icy, but calm, as Dean and his people were not removed from the DA, as Ginny continued to take the high road.

Still, Ginny already had her sights set on a potential Dean replacement. After the Howler storm died down, she took out a pad of muggle paper and a quill, and started a letter.

Dear Jonas,

That's all she wrote for the time being, just letting the idea marinate in her head for a few days. She had plenty of time, as Dobby did not usually come round until Saturday unless it was an emergency. She, Jonas, and Drew had done a lot of late night talking during their time at The Hollow, and she had always remembered Jonas' last words to her before he left:

“You know if you and that Dean guy don't work out.....”

Words to ponder, and Ginevra Prewett Weasley was doing just that, and would for a few days to come.

Monday, November 17, 1997

Various points in Great Britain, muggle and magical

Mid-day

Travis Biller was standing at the port side of HMS Dauntless, the lead frigate in a six ship detachment for the exercise that Rufus had asked for. He was listed on the ships' books as a civilian technical representative, or tech rep, dealing with the new kind of ordnance that the Dauntless happened to be carrying. The ship's Captain, Patrick Ramsey, had a magical sister-in-law, hence his being picked to lead this assignment, he had even heard of Voldemort. Ramsey approached him now.

“How're the sea legs Mr. Biller?”

“I haven't booted yet, if that's what you are asking.” This was not Travis' first trip on a boat or ship, but he could count them all on one hand, and none of them were since his honeymoon 10 years previous. He had gotten onboard at Aberdeen, flying on in his first helicopter ride, another experience that he was not eager to have again. Except for the ride back.

“Pity, our able Seamen need some amusement, and civilian passengers are always good for that. Though something tells me that you’re not a civilian in your world.” Ramsey was 43 years old, and his sister-in-law had actually gone to school for a year with the Marauders, graduating just before Travis himself had entered Hogwarts.

“No I am not, though you probably don’t have an equivalent in yours to what I do. Think along the lines of M from the Bond movies, that’s probably the closest thing.”

“Interesting. Did you do what you needed to do to our ammunition.”

“I did, and don’t worry, it will not impact how it behaves in the gun itself. If your shells blow up before they are supposed to, it won’t be because of anything I did.” He had detected an undercurrent of fear, though very slight.

“You’re betting all of our lives on that you know. A chain reaction could tear the ship in half.”

“I’ll die right along with you. Don’t worry Captain, this will go very smoothly.” He didn’t tell Ramsey that he could, and would, Apparate away at the first sign of explosive trouble.

“We will be commencing the exercise in one hour. You can watch from the bridge if you like.”

“I would like, thank you Captain. I have teams on Sanday and Mainland as we speak, with any luck we should get immediate results.” Sanday and Mainland were the second largest and largest of the Orkney archipelago.

“Alright then, let’s get up to the bridge.”

Once up on the bridge, Travis had to deal with Ordnance Officer Ken Stott, a friendly sort, who would not stop peppering Biller with questions about the shells they were testing. Travis had a great

memory for the written word however, and he had virtually memorized the relevant manuals, just in case.

Still, he was going to ask Rufus for a short holiday after this insanity was over, his blood pressure was a bit too high, especially for a 36 year old in good physical condition. Adding to his stress was that he did not have his wand on him, if it were inadvertently discovered it would raise a few dozen questions that Travis had little interest in answering at present. He was positive that his gear had been searched, and his muggle clothing left little room to hide something as long as a wand. He checked his watch, barely more than half an hour until showtime.

Meanwhile, on Island 12 itself:

The Death Eaters were preparing for the Azkaban assault, which was to launch in less than 90 minutes time. It had taken things a bit longer to get going on the plan than usual, due to the loss of all three Lestranges, who were part of the core assault planning group, and Gibbon, who would have trained the shock troops once the plan was actually formulated. The bad man had yet to expand his inner circle, and the primary attack plan was courtesy of Frederick Nott, and his disturbing obsession with getting his son back at any cost. Well, disturbing for Pettigrew anyway.

There was also the small matter of finding out where Azkaban was, something their inside man at Gringotts, Bradley Meltzer, had called in every chit he had to discover. Meltzer was the fourth highest ranking human at the bank, his job was to liaise with the muggle banking system in Great Britain and be one of the goblins' front men. He had no daily contact with Bill Weasley at all, and had virtually no dealings with The Ministry. But he knew how to get information, and creating a mass of roundtrip port keys for the operation was only a matter of time and money. Lots of money, over 100 galleons per portkey, as the experts in the field were just as afraid of Rufus and Harry as they were of Voldemort and.....well, no one else on the Death Eater side really gave off that kind of menace any longer. The ones who had, had all been killed or captured. Or rendered useless, like Lucius. It was a different world that they lived in, but to his credit perhaps, Voldemort was aware of it.

The assault force was to be comprised of 100 soldiers, plus Voldemort and his entire council. This was not the bad man's entire cadre, he was hedging his bets in case another disaster awaited him. Only Parrish, wrapping up things in Bodo, would not be going along of the higher-ups, not that he could fight anyway, magicals who were Potions Masters and good fighters like Snape were very rare.

Negotiations with the Dementors had failed, so the Death Eaters would simply have to go through them. Voldemort, who was not above doing some research himself, had come up with a spell that might do something more permanent than a Patronus, though 'might' was the operative word. There were 65 prisoners currently in the joint, about 15 of whom had nothing to do with Voldemort in the slightest. Still, they would all be retrieved, the bad man needed as many shock troops as he could get his hands on.

Once his group leaders were assembled, Voldemort addressed them simply.

"The attack is about to commence, and it will be a successful one. Make sure that you do as little damage as you can to the facility itself, we want to capture it intact. Any human guards at the prison are to be stunned, not killed right away, we need as much information about The Ministry's thinking as we can get, and low level personnel often have valuable information that they have not grasped the full value of."

Nods all around, as if anyone would dare disagree with him. Still, the upper echelon Death Eaters were in agreement that they had to do something big, something that would regain them some semblance of respect in a society increasing coming under the velvet seeming thumb of Rufus Scrimgeour. That was the big worry, that public opinion would side with someone who was a strong leader, yet was not bent on wholesale slaughter of anyone who remotely crossed him. And to a certain degree public opinion did count, this was not Russia of the Communist Revolution where a tiny minority could take over an entire country and make it stick for 70 plus years. Even the weakest magical could still cause problems if that's what he/she wanted.

That said, Voldemort was still focused on Dumbledore and Harry as his main rivals, though the Malfoy theory of Harry as a pleasure loving rich boy was gaining more and more credence with Voldemort as the months went on, Narcissa and Lucius mirrored the Death Eater thinking in that regard, even if neither of them were Death Eaters any longer. Part of the reason that Voldemort had been so cautious over the last months, was that he did not want to provoke too much of a response from Harry while the Dumbledore negotiations were going on.

The troops began to assemble outside the main house, a perfect replica of the original Riddle Manor, when they heard some not so distant explosions. Everyone was outside, the reserves being at their own homes this day, only the full-time residents of Riddle Manor II even knew about the raid, and all were going along. Pettigrew immediately took out some omnioculars and scanned the horizon, giving a quiet commentary to his Master.

“A small fleet of muggle ships, it looks like they are doing a live fire exercise of some sort. They’re firing into the water, they don’t seem to be focusing on any of the islands.” Many of the Orkney islands were animal and/or bird preserves of some sort, and since Pettigrew had researched all of this not so long ago, he was curious about why the muggles were firing explosives like they were. Still, it was none of his concern really, and as the shells did not appear to be getting any closer, he was not unduly worried.

The explosions did move away for a moment, and then wheeled back as the HMS Dauntless drew a bead on Island 12.

KABOOM KABOOM KABOOM

Three shells landed right on the front beach of the island, less than half a kilometer from the main house. Still, it did appear to be coincidence , and there did not seem to be anything worth worrying about. Yet.

Travis was at the bow of HMS Dauntless, using a pair of disguised omnioculars to do his own brand of sightseeing. He saw the shells

that hit Island 12, and they did not kick up water as the others had, they kicked up sand. This was the one.

Unless there was more than one island under some form of magical camouflage, but Travis did not want to consider that right about now. He grabbed his communicator and called up to Captain Ramsey on the bridge.

“Captain could you come down here please?”

“Be right there Mr. Biller.”

Ramsey strode down, not in too much of a hurry, needing to keep up appearances for the troops. He had his own binoculars with him, and as he got to Travis:

“You found it?”

“I did indeed, thanks to you. Look at the spot 43 degrees east.”

Ramsey did, and of course did not see anything.

“I’ll take your word for it, you want more fire put there?”

“Please do, raise the elevation a little bit if you can, there’s a house there somewhere.” The Death Eaters had to quarter somewhere, and Travis doubted that a tent city would be the housing of choice, especially with Orkney weather.

Privately, Biller couldn’t believe that Ramsey was so accommodating, but the other man simply radio the requisite instructions to the bridge, and the guns were soon firing as ordered.

And it hit the target, as a shell burst right on to the roof of Riddle Manor II. Biller was too far away to see any specifics, but he knew that he had hit pay dirt. No pun intended.

“Thank you Captain Ramsey, I believe my part in this exercise is now concluded.”

“You’re welcome. What did you see?”

“Confirmation Captain Ramsey, confirmation.” He hustled to a private space, where he took out a mirror and got hold of Rufus.

“You found it?”

“I did Rufus.” He gave out the coordinates, muggle style, Wizards had never really had any kind of maritime tradition.

“Got it, we’ll be there in 30 minutes. Did you see anything else that might help us?” The half hour delay was needed to manufacture the portkeys necessary.

“No, it was too far away, but damage was done, I could see that much. I saw sand and concrete where I should have seen water, that’s good enough for me.”

Oh yes, damage was done. Voldemort’s quarters were now history, and if he had actually been in them, as he was less than an hour before.....

Well let’s just say a few questions would have been answered about him and his ability to withstand muggle explosives.

Pettigrew had been all set to order an immediate evacuation when the shelling stopped, only eight rounds in total had hit the island. Voldemort motioned for him to come back to the house with him.

“You will all remain in position while Wormtail and I inspect the damage. We leave in 20 minutes.”

The two made the walk quickly, as Pettigrew looked very worried.

“Was that just a random exercise Master?”

“I don’t know Wormtail, but this seems like too much of a coincidence. You are positive that we have no moles?” Only in front of Pettigrew would Voldemort admit that he did not know something.

“I’m positive my Lord, we are totally clean.” Assuming that the Veritaserum was competently made, he didn’t say. One did not criticize Parrish in front of Voldemort unless one had irrefutable proof. They walked without any further talking until they got to the house, and walked upstairs to find that the shell had landed directly on Voldemort’s bed. Which drove it down two more floors, gravity and chemistry doing that kind of thing. The other shells had ruined the back porch and some of the siding, but otherwise were harmless. The two of them were about to head back when Pettigrew had an inspiration:

The rat whipped out his wand and did a scan of the bed, just in case. He found a residue of something he had never come across before, spell-wise, but was hesitant to ask his boss. But his boss asked for him:

“What did you find?”

“I don’t know Master, that’s the problem. Perhaps you could do a scan yourself, I don’t know all of the wards and spells you would have had in your personal quarters.”

Voldemort, not sure what his minion was getting at, nevertheless did the scan. He too found the residue, but also did not know what to make of it.

“You think this spell, or whatever it is, was on those shells, don’t you Wormtail?”

“I think it is a distinct possibility, our wards should have prevented any explosives from landing here, at least in theory.” It’s not like they could borrow a frigate and test this kind of thing.

“Let us go out to the back and see if it’s there as well.” They quick marched out there, but the debris was spread too far, and the

counter-spell that Travis had used was meant to dissolve rather quickly. Indeed the bedroom evidence was now gone, as they stood out there and pondered.

“Master, something just does not feel right here.”

“I agree, but the Azkaban plan must take precedence. Make sure all of our private papers remain private.”

“They are my Lord, they are at our storage facility.” The facility was in a muggle bank in Scotland, the last place The Ministry would expect to look. The bank was owned by Voldemort through unknowing nominees, his only direct muggle holdings.

They rejoined the others, without saying what they had learned, At Voldemort’s command, they took hold of their portkeys:

“Activate.”

Times 20, as all 110 of them popped away.

They popped away just 12 minutes before the Aurors arrived.

Flashback to the Auror Command Ready Room.

Bones was to lead the assault, after a vicious argument with Rufus whereby she pointed out that she did not want to be Minister if he got himself killed, and that she doubted that Dumbledore would make the mistake of turning it down again. That brought The Minister up short, and he reluctantly agreed, without much more arguing. He was now regretting sending Travis on that ship, surely someone else could have done that couldn’t they?

They were sending a force of 50 Aurors, over half of Auror Command, for what a few of them hoped might be the final slaughter that brought their enemy to his knees. Bones was just hoping for a victory of any kind, one that would keep the public happy and on their side. The election was less than four months away, and while no one had come out as a candidate just yet, there was still plenty of time.

“Alright then folks, our rules of engagement are very simple: Kill anyone you think is a Death Eater. There should be no collateral damage at all, since this is an out of the way island. I want this done quickly and cleanly, with as few casualties on our side as humanly possible. Any questions?” There were none, and the force soon portkeyed on to Island 12, where they of course found it deserted.

Bones led her troops up to the house, and found strong magical evidence that they had just missed their prey, there was even still warm food in the kitchen. She got her own mirror out and quickly connected to Rufus. The Ministry was in lockdown with so many Aurors out of the office, so this was the only way of communicating until The Minister lifted it.

“They’re gone Minister, and it has not been that long since they were here.”

“All of them?”

“I did a scan, no one is on this island but us.”

“Hang on a second Amelia, let me find out if anything is going on in Diagon Alley.” Hogwarts was loaded with so many, very easily accessed and activated, alarms that he knew it was nothing there, at least not yet.

He took out another mirror, the mate of which resided under the front counter of WWW. He tapped it on:

“Lee, are you there?” There was a lag of just a few seconds.

“Yes Minister, what can I do for you sir?”

“How is everything in Diagon Alley? Any disturbances or the like?”

“No sir, it’s pretty quiet. Let me peek outside for a second.” Lee was wondering what the hell was going on, but ultimately decided that he

was not paid to ask those kinds of questions. He confirmed that it was business as usual in the Alley.

“Nope, nothing sir.”

“Thank you Lee, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Glad to be of help Minister.” Lee tapped the mirror off, really hoping that nothing was going on that he should be worried about. He still took his wand a little further out of his jeans pocket, just in case.

Rufus relayed this information to Bones, who was at a loss. Until it hit both of them, and they said it almost as one:

“Azkaban!”

“Azkaban!”

Flashback less than half an hour:

The Death Eaters arrived at Azkaban Island in good order, though outside the building itself, which was riddled with anti-portkey wards. There was no front door, as prisoners and guards, both human and non-human, were not allowed outside, and any visitors were to come through the dedicated floo system housed in the Warden’s office.

Voldemort led his people up to the front of the structure, and a few well placed green bolts later, they were inside. They were met by a nervous looking man, very thin and pale. He was wearing gray colored robes and seemed to be expecting them.

It was Robert Allyn, Azkaban’s Warden.

“Is the floo system shut down Warden?”

“It is sir, a malfunction of some kind, I don’t know how to fix it.” That was his story and he was sticking to it.

“Excellent, here is the key to your new Gringott’s vault. A sum total of 100,000 galleons has been deposited in it.” He took a small gold key from his pocket and put it in the sweaty palm of Allyn, who was terrified just to be in his company. Which is just how Voldemort liked it.

“Thank you sir, thank you.”

“Are there any humans left inside amongst the guards?”

“No sir, I gave them all the afternoon off. There are 24 Dementors inside, that is all.”

“Now you may go, we will make sure that it is well known that you were killed in the attack.”

“Thank you again sir, I am very grateful.” Allyn’s wife had just divorced him, and his grown children had never much liked him in the first place. So when Frederick Nott made the approach, all that was left to decide how much his ‘soul’ was worth. It was worth 100,000 galleons as it turned out. Allyn had carved out the hole in the anti-portkey ward, and also shut down the floo system. This was why the Azkaban attack had to move forward, everything was timed. He took off at a run, and quickly Apparated away. Voldemort just smiled, and made a lazy motion with his hand.

“Follow me.” He led them inside and made their way to Allyn’s former office, where the keys to the cells were. They got 1/3 of the way there when they encountered their first pair of Dementors. The bad man raised his right hand at the lead Dementor:

“Prostegia!”

A purple mist came out of his fingers and the particles started attaching themselves to the Dementor. Even Dementor number two stopped to see what the hell was going on, as his/her partner started jerking around, but less and less as more the mist got on him. Voldemort himself had no idea it was going to work this well, and kept on firing as the second Dementor was frozen in place, eventually

collapsing to the ground. The bad man walked up to them and poked them with his foot.

Nothing.

He turned to one his mid-level flunkies:

“Maxwell, take your team and secure these two things at our alternate base. Keep them locked up until I return, they will be of immense forensic value. Here is the portkey.” He handed Robert Maxwell a long chain that would take them to another tiny little island, this time off The Azores, that Dmitri Flint had arranged for them. After the shelling incident, the bad wanted to take no chances, though this constant switching of hideouts was beginning to remind of the muggle cartoons he had been forced to watch as a child.

“Right away my Lord.” He and his five person group gingerly levitated the Dementors and moved back to the part of the island sans wards. Voldemort himself wasted no further time and strode even more confidently than normal to the Warden’s office, though his extremely acute hearing could hear most of the other 22 Dementors, and a few of them appeared to be communicating, though he couldn’t be sure.

Once in the office, the keys were easy to find, a lot easier than any of them had figured they would be.

They were laying on Allyn’s very large desk, carefully arranged by cell number. It seemed that he wanted to go that extra kilometer for his 100,000 galleons. Voldemort, while idly wondering why they had not approached this very helpful man before, divided up the keys and sent his team leaders to the cells.

“If you come across any Dementors, use the spell that I used: Prostegia. You must put all of your power and focus into it. If it does not work for you, use Patronus and call for me.” The teams were six people each, and six well done Patronuses should hold off a few Dementors, or so the theory went. Very few magicals not named Harry had any recent history with it, it was rather a lost art. That’s one

reason the evaluator at OWL's had been so impressed with Harry's version.

After five minutes, the prisoners started streaming in, most of them in very bad shape.....Allyn's office was rather huge and could fit quite a few people. Theo Nott was the first to enter, and he immediately fell on to his knees in gratitude.

"Stand up Theodore."

"Thank you so much Master, I will forever be grateful."

"You are a fine man Theodore, you will be in a leadership position very soon." And he meant it, the bad man had a lot of respect for the young man, who was what he had always wanted Draco to be: A smart Death Eater, who was not too obvious. Sometimes brazen was not always best. While this was going on, Pettigrew was searching Allyn's files for information, and what he found was not good.

"My Lord, Gibbon is not here. There is no record of him anywhere."

Hold that thought, as Voldemort's reply was interrupted by the sound of screaming from one floor up. Since Dementors did not scream, this was not a good thing for the Death Eaters. Voldemort himself glided up the nearest stairwell and found one of his six person teams laying on the ground, their souls no longer their own. He pointed to Frederick Nott:

"Take 10 men and make sure there are no more scenes like this, use Sonorus to communicate with me if you need to." Right now Nott would kiss his boss' robes for getting his son back, so he rushed off.

Nott would report that 20 more Death Eaters were rendered useless by the Dementors, three full teams and two men from another. All of the Dementors would wind up being frozen, and Voldemort would order eight more of them to be transferred to the Azores facility, with the other 14 to be destroyed immediately. Pettigrew looked at the forms of the Dementors, just laying there on the ground, and hesitantly asked.

“How are we to destroy them Master?” He really wanted to ask how long the purple mist thing would last, but he had the sneaking suspicion that Voldemort did not know that info himself.

“Take an hour and continue to go over Allyn’s papers, there should be something there. If you cannot find anything, simply locate the nearest active volcano and drop them in it.”

Pettigrew somehow kept a straight face with that last suggestion, and then remembered that he was high enough on the food chain as second in command, that he could delegate that harmless little duty to someone else.

“Yes Master, I will go to the files right now.” He quickly left before anything else could happen.

Voldemort strolled around his new domain, and then summoned Haskell Treviso, a mid-level Death Eater who was also an animagus. A toad in his case.

“Haskell, go to Island 12 and get a read on the situation. See if our Ministry friends were there, or still are. Take as much time as you need to get the job done correctly and thoroughly. Do not get caught.”

“Yes Master.” He was handed another portkey and took off at a run. Voldemort allowed himself a small smile, in view of no one else of course.

It was fun to have power, and the bad man had his mojo back.

End Chapter

Author's Note: I seem to be having Warrick's father use the alternating names of Nick and Martin, sorry about that. For the record, Warrick's father is named Nick, Nick's father is named Martin. As you know, I believe in full disclosure, and while no one had caught this, I felt I should share. In all fairness to would be catchers, there are so many unfamiliar names in this story that it's hard sometimes. Also, another reminder that since this is our second year with Great Lakes and its procedures, I'm leaving a lot of them out this time, since they were gone over in Chapters 5-22. I know I love to put detail in here, but I try to keep redundancy to a minimum. That's the idea anyway.

Monday, November 17, 1997, continued

3:00 pm GMT

Office of the Minister of Magic, London

Bones arrived just after Rufus lifted the lockdown, and found her boss leaning back in his chair, looking as calm as she had ever seen him. Then again he always looked calm now that she thought about it.

"Well?"

"Well what Amelia?"

"What about Azkaban?"

"Taken over by Voldemort, all the Dementors were killed and Warden Allyn was complicit."

Bones needed a moment to take all this in, and again marveled at Rufus' calm demeanor. She knew that Travis would have destroyed the office by now.

"You had Listening Charms in his office." Not a question, just an assumption, though Allyn had never been Dark suspected in the past.

"They were very carefully camouflaged, it took Voldemort and Pettigrew over 30 minutes to find them all, I just got word that they

removed the last one less than five minutes ago. We still got a lot of interesting intelligence though, not a total loss.”

“And Allyn?”

“Apprehended coming out of Gringotts less than 15 minutes ago, he confessed to all of it before Cleburne had a chance to remove all the hair from his nether region, one hair at a time with a dull knife. I’ve never seen Patrick so pissed off.” Head Unspeakable Patrick Cleburne would be grumpy for the rest of the week at the lost opportunity, though Rufus would give him Gibbon later on to play with. Habeas Corpus meant nothing in the magical world, and Gibbon had killed so many people in his time that not a lot of sympathy was wasted upon him. These were not part of Cleburne’s official duties, he just liked to pitch in and help.

“What were the Death Eater losses?”

“They lost 20 troops from what I heard, all to the Dementors, and got 65 back, so a win for them. We lost 24 Dementors and no humans, unless you count Allyn. At least he spared the other human guards, which should knock a year off his prison sentence. So only 98 years in whatever facility we replace Azkaban with.”

“Rufus, I have to ask you something.”

“No, I did not allow Voldemort to have Azkaban so that he wouldn’t target the muggles out of desperation.” He had relayed the substance of his Tony Blair conversation to her and Travis the same day that it happened, so he really couldn’t blame her for asking.

“Was I that transparent?”

“Travis asked me the same thing five minutes ago, I just figured. He should be here within the hour, there was some issue with the muggle helicopter that he needed to get off the ship.” As in it had almost crashed upon landing back on the ship.

“What do we do now?” At least she knew now why he was so calm, Bones knew that Biller was the emotional one in that friendship, now that she mused on it she felt that Biller would have immediately tried something horrible on Allyn, to see what else he knew. She hoped that the trip back would do something about that.

“How many people did you leave up north?”

“Thirty, they’re all sifting through the house for clues and evidence. The Death Eaters apparently left right after the shells landed, I don’t know if the shelling sped up their plans or not.”

“We can get that information out Allyn whenever we want. Put the island under Fidelius as soon as you can, you be the Secret Keeper, we don’t want them returning for their clothes and bedding.”

“What about Plan Delta?”

“Begin implementation of it immediately, but don’t announce anything as of yet. Just make sure that all Department Heads, Aurors, and Wizengamot members are covered first, then Gringotts human personnel and the rest of the Ministry, then the rest of the populace. All that will be left to defend after that is Diagon Alley, this building, and Hogwarts.”

“I only hope that it goes as easy as you make it sound.”

“That goes for the both of us.”

Plan Delta involved putting the homes of the entire magical population of Great Britain under Fidelius, with the three stages as Rufus had described. Of course the homes of very senior government officials were already under Fidelius, but the idea was to leave only three places that would need fast Auror coverage, and Hogwarts and The Ministry were now free of Dark, and thus could be secured a lot better without any weeds in their gardens.

“Have you told Dumbledore?”

“Yes, he appeared in my office right after the whole thing started, I saw no harm in telling him what was going on. He is in favor, for what that’s worth.”

“It means fewer hassles.”

“Yes, we have enough of those to last us a long time, and on the whole I would prefer to act in concert with the old man, not in opposition. Send two teams to Diagon Alley and have them start putting up anti-portkey wards, then have two more teams do the same to Knockturn Alley tomorrow. I want it all done by the end of the week.”

Bones nodded, then thought of one last matter.

“And Bodo?”

“I ordered it taken right after I received official word about Azkaban. We have their Potions Master intact, and all of his illicit brewing as well, it was quite the treasure trove. The lab itself was unfortunately burned to a crisp, I’m not clear how, but it did happen after our people and evidence were safely away.” He said this last part with a straight face, as if he had not given the order. He had acquired a taste for that kind of thing after Riddle Manor I.

“How much will Parrish know?”

“Who cares, it makes for a less satisfying victory for Voldemort, and that’s all I am concerned with. Reach out to the other European governments and alert them about a Potions Master hunt due by our friend.” The relatively few in Great Britain were already under heavy surveillance anyway.

“Good idea, perhaps this is a task we can subcontract to our werewolf friends?” Brandon and Grant she meant, who had thus far brought in the dead bodies of four low-level Death Eaters and a pair of live sympathizers who had now just been liberated by the Death Eaters. Not quite living up to their end of the deal yet, but their efforts

were still ongoing and satisfying enough for the time being. Rufus was already nodding.

“Couldn’t agree more, Grant speaks French, have them cover France and that area, and perhaps Ireland as well. Grant is Irish and should have some contacts there still.”

“I’ll make contact with them before I leave. Anything else?”

“Just be safe Amelia. Oh, and make sure that the troublemaker twins know what’s going on, so they can tell Harry.” Rufus and Travis both thought that the more Harry knew what was going on, the more invested in the whole war he would feel and be. This would only lead to positive things as far as they were concerned, with Bones’ reluctant agreement, in principle.

“As long as he doesn’t send any more Howlers.” She paused for a second, and they both broke up laughing, Bones first laugh since all the mess had started. They had heard about Dean’s punishment.....or rather Phase One of Dean’s punishment, from Remus.

“Our young friend is very adept at psychological warfare, which is fine by me since he’s on our side.”

“Yes, aren’t we fortunate?” She was smiling though, there was no tension in the room to speak of.

“Have a good day Amelia, I’ll make sure that you’re notified once Parrish is ready for questioning.” The questioning wouldn’t begin until all of the evidence was catalogued. The Bodo complex had been rather large and well stocked, and they wanted to have an exact inventory so as to know just what questions to ask Parrish in what would be several sessions before the mercenary Potions Master would be shipped off to.....well, whatever prison Rufus came up with.

“Yes Minister.” Bones took her leave, praying that the rest of her day would be nice, quiet, and dull. Oh yes, and dull.

Bones would tell the twins, who would tell Harry, who would pretend to his fellow Marauders that he did not much care about Voldemort taking Azkaban or Potions Masters being captured.

He did.

Parrish would wind up being a treasure trove of information, as Rufus coerced Gibbon into assisting with the questioning. And 'coerced' is a gentle term, with Cleburne and his wand doing some further threatening. It turned out that Parrish knew pretty much everything about everything, since all the major Death Eaters thought he was harmless and thus felt free to talk about everything around him. A lot of insight was gained in Voldemort's mind, if one wants to call it that. Parrish and Gibbon were both kept at The Ministry, as Abel Rosnovski, the American magical construction specialist, was imported to build the new Azkaban.

The new Azkaban being essentially a sub-sub-sub basement to The Ministry itself, only with no Dementors. Access was still extremely limited, and since they only had three real prisoners, Gibbon, Parrish, and Allyn, there was no need for a Warden that could turn traitor on them.

The devil really is in the details.

Meanwhile, at Azkaban, Voldemort was consolidating his gains and calculating his losses. Pettigrew came up to his Master with something of a problem.

"Master, what shall we do with the Umbridge woman?"

Yeah, that was a problem alright. Umbridge, for all her flaws, had always been publicly anti-Dark, and had not known about Fudge's arrangement with Voldemort. Voldemort sensed an opportunity here.

"First see if we can ransom her. Let us find out how much The Ministry would pay to get her back in their clutches, she serves no useful purpose with us. Someone with that limited power and

intelligence is no help here, I have enough bootlickers in our ranks, I don't need their Queen." Back in the day, he had only half-heartedly tried to recruit Umbridge, and that was more for numbers than anything else.

"Shall I start with 100,000 galleons for the opening bid?"

"Make it 200,000, and then offer her to Potter for double the amount. The lad has the cash, and might want the revenge, especially if it can be kept quiet. Send a message to him through the joke shop." Proof that the Rufus offer had not become public. In fact three former Ministry employees had taken the 'five minutes alone with Umbridge, with wandless magic only' offer, though they did no long-term damage, and her injuries had healed during the four months plus she had been inside Azkaban. She was barely conscious most of the time, and Voldemort did not bother to have a look at her this day.

"It will be done Master." Pettigrew scurried off to make the arrangements, and to torture her a little with some well placed Cruciatus, he needed some refresher work.

Haskell Treviso, the Death Eater Animagus that he had sent back to Island 12, returned after about 90 minutes with his report.

"Master, there are approximately 30 Aurors tearing the house apart as we speak. They got there, from what I gather, less than 20 minutes after we departed."

"What about the ship, did you hear anything about that?"

"No Master, nothing was said about the muggle firing exercise."

That's because only Bones, Biller, and Rufus knew about it. The Aurors storming the beach at Island 12 were not told where the intelligence had come from. All three of the leaders knew that if something like that got out, that they had gone cap in hand to the muggles asking them for help.....well their lives would be somewhat less likely to last a long time than they would have been before.

“Go back there and see what else you can find out. Stay as long as they do, but do not expose yourself to potential capture, you are too valuable to lose right now.” And he was, Treviso was one of only four Animagi in the Death Eater ranks, and for some reason Voldemort had more confidence in him than the others.

“Yes Master, it will be done.”

“Good, now get something to eat and be off within the half hour.”

Treviso was very relieved to hear that last part, he didn't much like eating bugs and such in his Animagus form, that of a toad.

He would wind up finding little else, and would only be there and back three more times before Bones put the island under Fidelius as instructed. Once this Voldemort business was taken care of, they would consider making Island 12 the new Azkaban. That the Voldemort business would be taken care of was a given, at least in the thought processes of Rufus Scrimgeour and Travis Biller. They just needed to hang on until Harry graduated, and not take any more heavy losses. They didn't believe the Prophecy anymore than Harry did, they simply thought that he was going to win.

It would not be for another day before Voldemort and company found out about the raid on Bodo and the capture of Michael Parrish. Pettigrew, on what would be his last assignment out of Voldemort's sight for quite some months, went to investigate and found that there was literally nothing to investigate. The place had been burned to a crisp, and the magic surrounding it had been masked and camouflaged so much that the rat did not dare stay in human form long enough to wave his wand around.

Pettigrew was put under unofficial house arrest mainly because Voldemort was again running out of advisors. Parrish had been allowed to know far too much as far as he was concerned, and no one in the organization knew more about Death Eater activities than Pettigrew, and that included Voldemort himself. Pettigrew was a details oriented person, and had decided that it was part of his purview to know everything, so as better to advise his Master. The

bad man felt that he could no longer risk his chief of staff to out there for capture. Still, work had to be done, and responsibilities were slowly shifted onto other personnel, but there was now a gaping hole in the infrastructure.

So for the second time in a little under a year, Frederick Nott was put to the task of finding another Potions Master. He knew that the European governments would be aware of this, prompted by Rufus, so he made his journey to Russia and its former republics, none of which were on cordial terms with their British counterparts. Indeed Kazakhstan had just been temporarily suspended from the International Confederation, so that was where he would start.

Thursday, November 28, 1997, Thanksgiving Day in The United States.

The Forrester House, Indianapolis, Indiana

Noon

Everyone was assembled at the big table, as Nick Forrester was waiting for the din to settle down before saying grace. It was his first time at one of the big gatherings, his father and father-in-law having decided that it was time that he earned his spurs.

Not the San Antonio Spurs, though that's who the absent Uncle Antonio would be playing in a few hours. Nick began:

“Lord, it has been one exciting year for our extended family. A year full of turmoil and triumph, and we learned lessons from it all. War came to our doorstep this year, as my son's school was assaulted by enemies. A new beginning was had by our two young ones, Marty and Keisha, as they began their magical educations. Triumphs were had, as Karen was promoted twice, and our brother's restaurant won a national award for excellence. But most of all Lord, we learned lessons from everything, and we have grown stronger because of it. It was quite a year, and we thank you for the gift of this one, and for all the gifts to come. Amen.”

“Amen.” Times 25, as it was a small turnout this year, and the 25 included all the members of the gang sans Marie, who was at her roommate Nicole’s this early part of the day, they would be doing another three household holiday meal-a-thon. Drew’s family in Milwaukee was due to eat at 3:00 pm, with the Tecumseh dinner at 6:00. Drew would be going to Marie’s house instead of Tecumseh, where he would meet her extended family for the first time, something he was not especially looking forward to, muttering something about needless pressure. When the timetable had been settled the week before, Claudia had made a plea:

“Harry, Jonas, can we please not have any food shenanigans this time? I speak only for myself when I say that my body image as a 17 year old girl is tenuous enough without watching the pair of you eat enough to feed an Army battalion.” Much grumbling ensued, though Warrick and Drew were notable in their collective silence.

“You know, we aren’t allowed to have any fun around here.”

“Yeah, Jonas is right, who are we harming? Besides the food budgets of everyone involved, but they know about us ahead of time.” The government paid for the Tecumseh meal anyway.

“Please?”

“Oh fine then, right Jonas?” Harry would do as he pleased anyway, but decided he would give it a shot for his friend.

“If that’s what Claudia Jean wants. We’ll only eat enough to feed an Army Company, satisfied?”

Claudia nodded as if she was more or less satisfied, though Drew had a thought, now that the danger zone was passed by:

“Just don’t hit on my sisters Jonas, that’s all I’m asking personally. They both have fiancés and Dad says both of them are the jealous type.” He was only half-kidding, and Jonas’ answer was likewise.

“I didn’t really like Heather when she was here, so you have no worries there. Hannah.....I remember her fondly.” Heather Baylor had graduated from school a month before Harry’s Great Lakes arrival, while Hannah graduated three years previous. Both were students at Amherst and were in fact engaged to a pair of guys that Drew had met but didn’t care for. Jonas had just been kidding about the Hannah thing though, he had gotten Ginny’s letter two days previous, giving him something to think about. It had been sent via the twins and Dobby, though Fred had opened it first, then resealed it.

The letter had been just a page of talking about the Dean aftermath, and Quidditch, and would Jonas like to have lunch with her sometime during the Christmas Break. Not lunch and a hotel visit, though she felt that she did not need to spell that out. Besides, she assumed that the twins would open it and read it. Before Jonas replied, he had shown the letter to Harry, who informed him of the mail tampering that Fred had done, so he already knew the letter’s contents. It was just Harry and Jonas talking, on their way back from Muggle Studies, no other witnesses.

“Look Jonas, you can do what you like here, within reason.” Uh oh.

“I know dude, I’m not about to cross you and the twins, I’ve seen your revenges and I want no part of them.”

Harry didn’t like the direction this conversation was taking, and he knew that Jonas wouldn’t do anything to truly hurt Ginny, if only because the younger one would undoubtedly have her guard up.

“Hey, if all Ginny wants is a hookup, that’s fine with me. I wouldn’t tell the twins or Ron that, but it’s not my lookout, it’s yours and hers. If you want to start something long-term with her, I’ll buy another trunk and we can do it Lee and Claudia style.” That was a pleasant surprise as far as Jonas was concerned, though his father had offered to buy him either a trunk or a car for graduation. Now he could have his cake and eat it too. Maybe.

“Look, while it may have been two years since my last actual long-term relationship, I did not, in fact, cheat on her. Nor have I ever

cheated on someone that I was involved with, officially.” And he hadn’t, which is why Jonas was so successful with the female population of Great Lakes. That and his total and complete discretion.

“Just make sure you don’t put me in the middle of anything, I’m begging you. You’re my close friend, Ginny’s my close friend, and I would really not want to have pick sides based on the evidence, which is how it would have to come out. I cannot stress that enough.”

Jonas was slightly surprised at first that he was being put on equal footing with Ginny, but he was not about to complain about it. He genuinely did not want to put Harry in the middle of anything.

“You have my word, if anything happens it will totally be aboveboard.” He reached out his hand, and Harry shook it.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’ll have that lunch with her and see how it goes. I figure I can come over with you when you do that thing with McCrae, we’ll just eat at different restaurants.” On Boxing Day.

“No, I have a better idea, you two eat at The Leaky Cauldron too. I’m sure that McCrae knows what Ginny looks like, let him wonder what she’s doing there, and with an American at that. He’ll assumed you’re one of my friends too.....ooooh, I’m liking this. Yeah, I’ll have the twins sell Ginny on it if she resists.”

“What are the twins going to say to me, that’s the question.”

“Are you nuts? Fred and George think you’re the shit, you’re just the kind of guy they want for Ginny. Just don’t screw up with her and you’ll be just fine. And don’t listen to anything Ron says on the matter.”

“When have I ever listened to Ron?”

Return to present:

Harry satisfied himself with three plates of stuffing and a piece of blueberry pie, and that was it. No turkey, no yams, nothing. Karen stopped by his place and actually asked him if he was feeling okay.

“I am ma’am, but Claudia threatened to kill me if I ate too much in front of her.” Claudia heard that and nodded.

“So that’s how to stop you? Threats? I must remember that.” She had a crafty smile on her face, though quickly removed by Harry’s reply.

“I’ll remember you saying that the next time Marty tries to put fireworks in the toilet.”

That generated a moment of pause, and a pair of glances at her sisters.

“Forget I said anything, just keep bailing him out and you can have all the stuffing your small frame desires.” She had made another triple portion this year.

“I’m always happy to do business with you Karen.”

Sensing that she was being snookered somehow, Karen Forrester had a follow-up query:

“How many toilets did he blow up?”

“Just the two urinals, but your son and I got them fixed up before any teachers could find out.” He emphasized the Warrick part, though the larger man had just handled the threatening Marty part, while Harry did the actual repair work.

“Is there a lot of that going on with those two?”

“Define ‘a lot’”

“I don’t really want to know, do I?”

“They haven’t gotten any detentions, and I’m sure we would have heard about a letter home.” He hoped that she would be satisfied with that and ask no more questions, though he had been honest with her so far.

“No, no letters home. You youngsters have done a good job with them, and I appreciate it.”

“I’m just paying for the food I eat. Wait until you see Marty swing the Beater bat though, then you’ll see chaos. The good kind.”

Marty had privately told Harry that he was just waiting for the \$200 a month allowance from Uncle Antonio to start up, that’s why he was making relatively few waves, not wanting to poach his future bankroll. The allowance got bigger as they got older, Warrick was currently clearing \$600 a month, spent mostly on CD’s and Reiko. The allowance lasted as long as they were taking classes of some sort, so Warrick would have four more years of it after this one, and it also assumed that Uncle Antonio would continue to have lucrative career, which in fact would last until 2006. Marty and Keisha made a little money off being WWW gofers, but nothing like what they would be getting after Christmas Break.

Karen and Nick had never seen Warrick play Quidditch, Karen didn’t like her huge son flying around on a tiny stick and couldn’t bear the thought of it breaking in mid-air, so she couldn’t watch. This meant that they never came to Great Lakes during the year, though they would for Warrick’s last game. Hands in front of their eyes perhaps, but they had promised to come.

“Watching Marty and Warrick assault people with a hard ball and a bat.....oh yes, I can’t wait to see that.”

“Only two more times you know, get those tickets while they last.....or words to that effect. Besides your future daughter-in-law will be playing too, and she’s tiny enough not to risk breaking the broom.” Sensing that Karen was still queasy about the subject, Harry shut up for the time being and concentrated on eating his stuffing.

Karen moved off to check on the others, but was comforted by the fact that her niece and nephew were still being looked out for by the gang, though she was already thinking about next year.

This was Marty's first visit home since he left, and his eight year old brother Ozzie was peppering him with questions like crazy. Ozzie had shown more magic at eight than anyone in the family had at a similar age, so it was a foregone conclusion about him being a Wizard. Marty was showing a heretofore unseen patience with his little brother, at least unseen by most of the gang, he having missed the dynamic while he was away at school.

"Yeah Ozzie, it's a lot of work, but you get to do some cool stuff. Not as cool as these geezers do, but I'll get there." These geezers were Jonas and Drew, sitting on either side of him, on guard duty. Harry and Warrick had insisted that they be given the privilege, since they weren't in the young fella's House back at school.

"Can you turn people into anything yet?"

Jonas and Drew were visibly horrified at the idea of Marty having that much power over anyone, but their young mascot didn't notice and just shook his head dejectedly.

"Nah, that won't happen for a few years yet, and you'll be there by then to see. Don't worry, I won't do any experiments on you."

Ozzie, in fact, looked more than a little disappointed at hearing that, he worshipped both Marty and Warrick, and wouldn't have minded a bit if they had turned him into a frog or something. This went on for some time, as Ozzie innocently egged his older brother on until he was promised a show of some kind when the entire family came up for the Jefferson game in June. As they were getting up, Drew took Jonas aside.

"We have to put a stop to this, you realize that don't you?"

“I know dude, their mom is going to know who was sitting next to whom here. Maybe Harry could threaten him or something?” That was certainly the most direct way of dealing with the situation.

“We can’t rely on Harry to bail us out of every problem can we?”
Well.....

“After this one is taken care of, that’ll be our new philosophy. I see no point in taking chances with that kid, he’s the new Weasley twin.”

Drew pondered that for a moment, and seemed to agree to take the path of least resistance.

“I’ll let Harry beat me at Wizard’s Chess the next time we play at the club. Then he’ll be in a good mood and willing to do what we want him to.” Drew and Harry were still the only gang members in the Wizard’s Chess Club, and they and Nan Mahon played a round robin pretty much every week.

“I’ll volunteer to sabotage Sally Jenkins somehow before the game in June.”

“Good thing you ‘recruited’ her last week.”

“Hey, she had just broken up with her boyfriend and needed a shoulder to cry on. Nothing happened, I swear.”

Drew actually believed that, believe it or not, and moved on.

“Okay, we have seven months to reel this in, it shouldn’t be a problem even if Harry won’t help us.”

“Right, we’ll do it the Jefferson way.”

“Which is?”

“Well we have seven months to figure out a Jefferson way.”

“And it only took us six years and change to start.”

All the while this was going on, Reiko, Claudia, and Sophie were being quizzed by Nick about colleges. He knew that they would be the ones making the decisions. He asked Reiko:

“Did you get your acceptance letters yet?”

“We’ve gotten five so far, with the other five due in the next couple of weeks. Thanks to Michael, we think, we got into all of them so far.”

Michael Steele had made an appearance, ate some turkey and stuffing, then floored away for his excruciating day with his in-laws, after his typical lavish compliments for the only decent food he would be allowed all day. He had indeed ‘fixed’ things through his muggle banking contacts, though no outright magic was involved. Or so he kept claiming, Harry had some pretty low test scores to be getting into The University of Virginia, and Jonas’ and Warrick’s grades were on the low end of the admission scale for that school as well. In all fairness though, Great Lakes did cheat the grades upward when it converted their actual grades into a muggle grade point average.

“Must be nice to have options. When do you have to decide by?”

“We’re having a meeting right before the Christmas Dance where we whittle the list down a bit, then we’ll do our visits during the holiday. You want to come with us for some of them? I know that one of my parents is going to be coming on a couple, and Drew’s mom too. And the twins of course, though they draw the line at actually going to college, but I’m sure they’ll be around a lot while we go.”

Nick’s smile grew larger at hearing about Fred and George.

“I like those two, lots of good stories they have to tell. Tell you what, pencil me in for the Hawaii visit, I’ll have some free time then I’m sure.” The girls all looked at each other, and then started giggling. Sophie explained.

“That’s what everybody else said too. Harry’s going to have to rent an entire hotel floor.”

“That boy can afford it, our soon to be Quidditch star.” He left unsaid a hope that whichever team signed Harry would sign Warrick too.....even if he was still hesitant to watch his son play an actual game. Nick had chosen his occupation very early in life, only going to Michigan State University to be with his future wife Karen, and he was hoping that Warrick would follow in his footsteps, not only in his choice of profession but in the early choosing of it.

“Well if his CD collection gets much larger he won’t be able to.” Sophie was kidding, as Harry had told her that he spent way less than the interest he was making off his cash, and that didn’t even count the WWW money that he wasn’t taking. That didn’t stop her teasing though. Nick now had a more thorny query:

“Is Harry really going to turn over the WWW selling to Marty and Keisha after this year?” All three women turned to see if the two Novices were in earshot. Neither of them were:

“No, he made a deal with Rachel Kessler, a Housemate of ours in Cortez. She’s going to be the manager and Keisha and Marty will work for her, as well as her little sister Anna, who’s in Proctor. Rachel’s only a year behind us, but we’re all a bit more comfortable with the two of them being a little older and more mature before they take on more WWW stuff, and Anna seems pretty level headed for someone her age too.” Rachel hardly needed the money, but she liked the idea of mentoring a staff like she would be, and Harry was already having Dobby teach her the basics, since she would be dealing with him for the most part.

“You all have done a good job with those two, we’re proud of you.”

“We’ve done our best.”

“Well it helps that there are eight of you, and two of them.” He had never met the absent Marie, and indeed had only just met Drew, but he had heard about both of them from Warrick.

“Oh that makes all the difference Nick.”

The gang soon took their leave and journeyed to the Bayers, meeting a just arrived Marie. Mitchell and Hollie Baylor lived in Milwaukee, with the floo being constantly in use as Hollie worked in Boston as one of the Midwest representatives in Congress. Congress was made up of 40 Witches and Wizards, 10 from each of the four districts, which were made up of the same areas as the schools were. So Hollie's district was unofficially known as the 'Great Lakes' district, and thanks to floo travel, she did not have to do the same as a real Congresswoman and have two homes, one in the capitol and one in the district. Hollie had less than a year left on her term, and rumor had it that she was going to make her announcement about the Presidency before the end of the year, magical elections not having the horrifically long ramping up that the muggle Presidential ones had taken to having.

It was a small Thanksgiving this year, just Mitchell, Hollie, their kids, and the aforementioned fiancés, as Christmas was the huge family gathering that Drew was already implying that he would gladly miss. Heather Baylor was just 19, but had been seeing her beau for six years already, he was a fellow Great Lakes graduate that Drew couldn't stand the sight of. Indeed Harry was fascinated by the frostiness that Drew treated his sisters with, he had heard all about it of course, but there was nothing like the real thing.

It was returned in kind too, as Heather and Hannah said polite hellos to all of the gang, and promptly ignored them for most of the meal, though there was no outright rudeness. It was a simple dinner of turkey and the usual fixings, with little of the cheeriness of the Forrester house at holidays, to say nothing of The Burrow, even as tense as The Burrow had been last Christmas. Most of the conversation centered on Hollie's job, as Mitchell couldn't talk about his for the most part, and Harry for one learned a lot more about the political process in America than Lyman had told him about. He had only talked with his friend's mother a couple of times at Commission meetings, and took this opportunity to pepper her with questions.

This was, perhaps, one reason the sisters were ignoring everyone, as they had heard this kind of thing many times before. They showed no interest in talking with The Boy Who Lived, and Harry found that to be vaguely refreshing, however few positive things he had heard about the sisters. He kept a somewhat close eye on them throughout the meal, something a lot of the others did too. Harry now felt that he had a good handle on why Drew was so quiet, even now he was the quietest gang member by a decent margin. After the meal things broke up into groups, and Mitchell took Harry aside for a minute.

“That was some plan you guys made to take down Salem, we were laughing our rears off after Brian and Jeff came back and told us about it.” The elder Baylor had received many congratulations, his son being one of the two prime architects of the operation.

“Congratulate Drew, a lot of it was his, he probably contributed more than I did.”

“You’ve been a good influence on him, he’s a lot more outgoing than he used to be.”

Hearing that gave Harry some Neville flashbacks, and the comment about ‘more than he used to be’ made him a little sad for his friend, that he had been so lonely for five years, he could certainly relate to that. Harry had never made the Drew/Neville comparison before really, at least when it was not Luna related, but this was something to think about in the near future.

“He’s been just as good a one on me, trust me.” It was true, only Sophie had talked Harry out of more rash ideas than Drew had.

“That’s good to hear, I’m only surprised that you haven’t gotten him on a broom yet.” Drew knew the mechanics of flying, but only barely. Harry laughed:

“I’m not a miracle worker you know, I’d have a better shot of winning the lottery than getting him to start wanting to fly.”

Then Mitchell laid out what he really wanted to talk about here:

“Harry, no doubt you’ve realized that things here are a bit strained, at least among our children.”

“So I’ve noticed.” He had a sinking feeling about this.

“The reason I bring it up, is that Hannah is getting married the day before Easter, and I am somewhat afraid that Drew will boycott the wedding.”

And the sinking feeling was rewarded.

“Your fears are realistic Mitchell, that’s all I can say without violating a confidence.”

“If you could please do me a favor, and talk him into going. He doesn’t have to participate in any way.....” He was stopped by Harry’s hand going up.

“That’s part of the problem you know, he knows that he wouldn’t be asked to participate. He would be window dressing to present a complete family picture, even though he knows his sister would not welcome him. He has not said that to me in so many words, but it doesn’t take a genius to figure it out.”

To his credit, Mitchell did not try to deny any of that.

“She’s jealous Harry, as much as it shames to say. Drew won the lottery, he’s academically smart, magically powerful, and has a moral center besides. His sisters are both reasonably intelligent, and marginally powerful, and they both know it, and can make the comparison. They don’t like to fly either, so they can’t even do that better than he can. I’m not saying that they are right to freeze him out like they do, I’m just telling you that it’s not for no reason, at least in their minds anyway.”

“And you and Hollie?” Drew was very warm and complimentary about his parents, but Harry wanted to see what Mitchell would say.

“You cannot force someone to like someone, it’s a sad fact of life that it took me years to figure out as a parent Harry. We have always strived to treat our children equally, and I think we did a good job there, given that they’re relatively close in age. We both love Drew very much, but I realize now that we should have done more to heal the rift, a rift that’s been almost 10 years in the making. I know it seems strange that I would confide in you like this Harry, not really knowing you that well.”

Harry certainly could have done without it, but recognized that maybe Mitchell had been waiting to talk about this with a friend of Drew’s that would understand, and if anyone did, it would be him.

“Would it be so bad if he didn’t go?” He looked over and saw Sophie making an effort with Heather, Claudia at her side for moral support.

“Well people would comment, and the bridge would grow even wider. Perhaps too wide.”

“I wonder at Drew having to be the one making the effort though, from what it sounds like not much effort has been thrown his way.”

The older man sighed, he had been afraid of that argument, and probably should have figured on Harry of all people making it. He had done his homework on The Boy Who Lived.

“I’m aware of the hypocrisy of my request Harry, but I’m making it anyway. I’m asking Drew to be the adult here, even if he’s the only one.”

“Have the actual invitations gone out yet?”

“Next week, and his name is on the list, as is Marie’s.” Speaking of Marie.

“That leads me to the question of why you’re not having this conversation with her.”

“You are his closest friend Harry, though I’m sure a lot of people would give you that title.” He was right in that one, leaving aside girlfriends and the like he was probably closest friend to Ron, Warrick, Drew, and the twins, though with them it was shared with Lee.

“Tell you what Mitchell, if Hannah makes a gesture at Christmas, one major enough for Drew to tell me about, then I’ll go the extra kilometer for you and get it done.” He didn’t really want to do this, he was fully in favor of Drew skipping the wedding if that’s what his friend was inclined to do, but Harry had not really learned his haggis lesson about people calling his bluffs.

“He’s going to be with you and his friends for most of the holiday, Hollie and I are planning on him only being there for Christmas Day.” Drew had been invited to The Burrow last year, but felt the reluctant tug of family and had declined, to his everlasting regret. He would not make the same mistake this year.

“Then that only narrows the time frame, doesn’t it? Better get cracking Mitchell, there’s less than a month to go. When is Heather getting married by the way?”

“Next Summer, over the Independence Day holiday.”

“Yes, the one where you beat us to get your freedom, even though we were thousands of kilometers away with glacial travel possibilities, and distracted by France all the while.” His practiced answer, said with a wry smile to any American who brought it up, and they did.

“You must have gotten some abuse this year.”

“Less than you might think, though I didn’t object when they threw a small party.” One that the twins had pranked like crazy, though nothing terribly exciting or anything that would justify it’s inclusion in a story.

“But we digress. A gesture you say eh? I’ll see what I can do, or rather Hollie will see what she can do, she can get through there

better than I can." A mother and her daughters, Harry could believe that.

"You can't use the boyfriend?"

"Fiancé, and no, I can't stand him either. A bit too blue of the blood for my tastes, just being a simple cop and all, but she loves him. Are you folks going to be doing this multiple house thing on Christmas too?"

"Some form of it I would imagine, though again it'll start in The Burrow like last year."

"Fair enough, we'll talk more then, hopefully I'll have good news and success to report. All of you are welcome in Denver as part of your Christmas Day tour, I hope you know that." Mitchell held out his hand, and Harry shook it, neither accepting nor declining the Christmas offer. Mitchell went off to speak to his wife, about which Harry could easily guess. Speaking of guessing, Drew and Marie came up to him a few seconds later, having been silent observers.

"What was that all about?"

"Do you really want to know?" Hoping he wouldn't, but alas.....

"The wedding eh, I was wondering which of you two he would make the approach to." Meaning Harry or Marie.

Like Harry had said in The Hollow back in July, Drew was very observant.

"Right in one, I'm supposed to persuade you to go, take one for the family and all that." The look on Drew's face would have made him laugh if this wasn't rather serious.

"And what did you tell him?"

Harry related the substance of the conversation, comforting himself with the knowledge that Mitchell had neglected to make him promise

not to. Drew actually looked a little relieved that that's all it was, and that Harry was so 'on his side completely' about the whole mess.

"She won't do it, so there's nothing to worry about."

"It'll be interesting to see what happens."

Marie sallied forth, feeling that she should throw her two cents in:

"You can't blame him for trying anyway, it must be hard on him sometimes, being put in the middle like that." This was an opening for Drew to rip his father for letting things get like they were, but he wasn't that kind of guy.

"I think you have a good plan Harry, let's see if there is a gesture made. If there is, then I'll go and pretend to like her for the day. If not, then I'll let my conscience be my guide and do what I want, which will probably mean a last minute decision. Feel free to talk me out of it when I do cave in on Good Friday and decide to go." Again, sounding bitter, and Harry and Marie both put their hands on his shoulders, as unbeknownst to them, Hollie Baylor was watching them very intently.

Marie decided to take the bull by the horns and end this now.

"Drew, I think we should go now, my parents wouldn't mind a bit if we showed up an hour early." She wasn't using a bossy tone, but a suggestive one, implying that maybe it would be best for all involved. It did work like a charm actually.

"That's fine by me, you guys cool to head to Tecumseh early Harry?"

Part of Harry wanted to pull a repeat of his Weir family stunt and go shake some sense into those sisters, but this was a different situation and he held off. This time.

"Works for me, let me go tell the others."

He did, and nobody was chomping at the bit to stick around. He politely thanked Mitchell and Hollie for a nice meal, and blithely ignored the Baylor sisters and their men, as he led his part of the gang outside for the portkey ride to Tecumseh. All four schools were mostly off the floo grid, so they would be taking the portkey to the Outer Perimeter, where they would walk the rest of the way, keeping up the fiction that they couldn't just take the not-to-be-known-about trunk floo right to the Aylesworths' quarters. Though that's how they would leave, direct from Oklahoma to Isla de Marauder, where they would crash for a day. Drew and Marie left even before they did, some hasty goodbyes and into the floo and on to the Ford house outside Cincinnati. They would meet up with the others at Tecumseh later for the trip to the island.

Once at the Tecumseh Outer Perimeter, Harry filled the other five in on Drew's difficulties as they made the 1000 meter walk to the school. Not surprisingly, everyone was on their friend's side, and Warrick even brought up the idea of doing some kind of prank on the sisters Baylor, to teach them a lesson. Sophie quickly scotched that.

"We should only do that if Drew suggests it, and we all know that he won't. Us involving ourselves anymore than necessary will only make things worse. Those sisters will just say that it's none of our business, family only, crap like that. Our job is just to be there for him to talk to, vent to, and lean on."

"And then Harry can threaten them until they do what we want."

"Don't start Jonas."

"Is the easiest way." If only.

"Uh huh, I'm going to threaten the daughters of the next President of the Magical United States. That would be a wise move, sure to get me many advantages in the future as I try to go to university here while playing in the tiny AQA." He was laughing though.

"Well I didn't say that it would be all upside."

Sophie liked Harry's rebuttal, but didn't dare give him a chance to talk himself out of it. She too was thinking about her parents and how Harry forced the issue there. It all worked out of course, but one of these days his luck would run out.

"Leave it alone Jonas, we just make sure that he has all the moral support he needs."

"Yes dear."

"Good boy, Ginny won't have much work to do to train you." After getting Harry's 'approval', Jonas had told the others about the Ginny lunch-to-be, which gave them all the ammunition they would need for the next little while. But he wasn't about to touch this, so talk turned to other things as they arrived at Tecumseh. At the halfway point, Harry had sent Dobby ahead, and Lisa Aylesworth was waiting at the door to let them in.

"So you two can walk, that's a pleasant surprise."

"We're pacing ourselves."

"Oh really?"

"The food at the Bayers wasn't that good Lisa, and we got threatened in Indiana."

"That's what I thought, I remember Drew saying that his mother and father never learned how to cook." The Bayers' house elf wasn't much use in the kitchen either, except for cleaning up, so Mitchell and Hollie at out a lot. Fortunately she ignored the threat comment.

They went on to the Tecumseh Dining Hall, where they plopped down next to Steve Atwood, whose had no truly close friends he could go home with, and was always there for holidays and breaks. He promptly proceeded to bend Harry's ear about the business and how things were going, sales-wise. Steve was now outselling Jessica Murray and Sarah Hoerauf by a count of two to one, combined, and the WWW three had given him a raise in his commission as a result,

as well as a small salary. That was not to say that the two ladies were selling badly, but the gang had already seen more than a few WWW posters and flyers pinned up on the various Tecumseh bulletin boards. Plus, it was obvious to everyone how excited Steve was about his job, even 11 months after he had gotten it.

The meal was typical school fare, just with turkey as the main meat dish. But the gang was not there for the food, it was to spend time with Karl and Lisa, especially as the stuffing was only average. Lisa had ultimately decided to go ahead with plans to apply for Deputy Headmistress of the school, as they had talked about last year at the time. The woman who currently held the job was retiring at year's end after over 40 years at the school, and it was a given that her successor would be a woman, for balance, and the preferred method was to see if there was a suitable in-house candidate first, and Lisa Aylesworth was a suitable in-house candidate with the correct gender. The only worry was that she would be her husband's boss, but as at the other schools, the Headmaster or Headmistress had all of the real power, and Headmaster Robert Clary just wanted a quiet school with no fireworks good or bad. If one will recall, he was the one school Head who would have turned Harry down flat if he had tried to go there after leaving Britain. Too much attention, too much bother, that was the Clary motto. Karl and Lisa put up with it because he hassled them very little, and they genuinely loved being educators.

Still, one of these days Clary was going to be replaced, and Lisa wanted to be in a position to be the one replacing him. That level of being her husband's boss she could handle.

After dinner, Steve asked Harry and the gang to come up to his room, where he could show them his account books for WWW. Puzzled as to why everyone was invited, they did so anyway, where Steve revealed the real reason for the invite:

"I used that prototype recording sponge you gave me, and I got some good stuff in case our school is the one to hit yours." So that was why, and Harry's face lit up. He had not wanted to put Steve in this position, but if the lad himself was volunteering.

“Where did you place it?”

“Under Burke’s desk in his classroom. He’s my teacher this year, so I’m in there a lot anyway. So far no one has noticed anything.” Burke had allowed his long time protégé Henry Hill to teach the Junior Year Basic Combat class, so the more senior teacher took Steve’s regular class. He handed over a sheaf of paper that included a transcription of the Senior Year Basic Combat planning sessions. James Burke, who looked just like a mob hitman if you did not know better, seemed to favor brute force over any misdirection, as Harry quickly skimmed the notes.

“These are very, very good Steve. You know you don’t have to do this right?”

“I make how much money because of you? I know where my bread is buttered. Besides, I don’t really like Burke that much, and it’s not like I’ll be part of any attacks until you guys are long gone, if I even make Basic Combat next year.” Steve was ranked number two in the Regular Defense class currently, the only class that he was not doing the Advanced version of.

“Well if you’re comfortable with it then, just make sure that you’re very careful and that you don’t get caught. I wouldn’t want to see you go down for something like this. Are the Seniors any good at Defense?”

“They’re not bad, but Burke tends to focus on Lycan tactics more than anything. I still haven’t dueled another person here yet, and I’ve been here over five years. That should be your advantage if you get enough of a warning.”

“Can Burke and Hill fight well?”

“They both made it through the Auror Academy at least, but beyond that I couldn’t tell you. They’re not bad teachers really, but then again I have nothing to compare them to.” In order to teach Defense in America, one had to graduate from the Auror Academy at some point, though all three of the other schools likely would make exceptions for

Harry if an opening ever surfaced. Reiko knew them second best, from talking with her parents.

“They’re not idiots, I’ll grant them that, and they did the Lycan invasion very well. But Mom and Dad don’t have too many good things to say about them, so I wouldn’t expect too much.”

Harry had heard much the same from Jacobson, who had only signed off on Hill leaving Auror Command to teach at Tecumseh the year before because Burke had gone to the mat for his protégé and insisted on it.

Talk for the rest of the time turned to WWW and how the selling was going. Atwood had identified a younger student that he was prepared to take under his wing, a Freshman boy in his House named Paul Shirley, who was not there right now, having gone to his roommate’s for dinner. Shirley had been specifically chosen because he was an orphan as well, having in his case been plucked right from an foster home and into Tecumseh. Not one of the bad foster homes that one reads about, but not a place he was too eager to return to. He was acting as Steve’s gopher this year, much like Marty and Keisha, and Steve wanted permission to put him on the payroll officially for the next academic year. Then Shirley would have four years by himself to do the selling, assuming that the market stayed flush.

Dobby had mentioned Paul in passing once, and Harry made a mental note to have his major-dome do a more thorough vetting of the kid, including a Dobby-style follow-along. He told Steve to keep things as they were, and he would get back to him. They were interrupted by the arrival of Drew and Marie. It was now time to fully induct Marie into the gang, as they went up to Karl and Lisa’s living quarters, where their trunk was.

“Marie, there’s just one more, very small thing we need to show you. It’s so insignificant that I can’t believe I’m bothering to swear you to absolute secrecy on pain of death, but I’m doing it anyway.”

Marie had thought that there could be nothing else, but she had an eager smile on her face, knowing it would be good, despite Harry's casual tone of voice.

"I swear I won't tell a soul, whatever it is."

Harry believed her, she had been totally trustworthy up through now, and the Listening Charms he had had Sophie plant in her room had given him no cause to change that. He did know that Drew was very good in bed, or so Dobby had grumbled to him, Dobby being the one who monitored the various Listening Charms that he had up and running. He was proud of Drew of course, but otherwise didn't much care, however much Marie told her roommates about it. And it was a lot.

"Alright then, there is something in the trunk that you need to see, something that makes it so much more than a trunk." That left a lot of open territory, as they all went down. Even Karl and Lisa joined them, wanting to see the reaction.

Once in the floo room, Harry took out his wand and flashed it against the only wall that was not decorated in some way. The flash took care of the Disillusionment Charm and revealed the fireplace. Marie was suitably agog.

"I was wondering why that wall was blank. I can't believe you have a floo in here!"

"Well it's not a real floo, it just works with the few others trunks like this one."

Marie was not at all slow on the uptake, indeed she got it quicker than Ron probably would have.

"How many other trunks have you bought?"

"More than a couple."

"Which is what? Five? Ten?"

“Well technically speaking, I don’t own this one, it belongs to our Professor friends here. There’s one in my dorm room, one in Sophie and Reiko’s room, one in the shop, and one in The Hollow. That’s four, though the number will only go up.....oh wait, there ‘s one on the island too, that makes five.”

“None in Hogwarts? Really?” Very quick, though the look of surprise on her face was very genuine, and the island mention seemed to have passed her by, Marie had not been told where they were going, only that it was going to be a fun surprise.

“Not yet, though that might be changing, right Jonas?” Everyone started laughing

“What did you mean about an island?”

“Follow us Marie, just do what we do. Remember the words ‘Let’s make it happen Cap’n.’”

“Um.....okay.”

“Trust me, you’ll love it.”

Goodbyes were said to the parents Aylesworth, who would be having their own day at the island on Sunday, they generally went about once or twice a month for an afternoon. Not as much as the twins, but they were the second most frequent island visitors. Reiko hugged them both, and promised to write them soon. Harry had one last question:

“How Hedwig doing? She seemed kind of mad at me the last time I saw her.” Lisa answered.

“She’s fine, just a little bored I think. She has plenty to do, she travels to one of our colleagues at Pathfinder a lot, but she misses you.”

“I’ll figure out something to do about that, I promise.” He was kicking himself for not paying her a visit tonight, but made a mental note to do it on the way back.

Warrick went first, then Reiko and so on. Harry and Drew went last, just to make sure that Marie said the floo address correctly. That was one advantage that the trunk floo system had over the regular floo system: You couldn’t go to the wrong place by accident, unless you said the precise address to the wrong place. So Harry saying diagonally instead of Diagon Alley couldn’t happen here.

Well, it could, he just would have stayed put is all.

She got through okay, and Harry turned to Drew.

“Just remember, if at some point she cracks up from all that I’ve laid on her, it’s your responsibility, being her beau and all.” No one had yet, but there was a first time for everything.

“I think I’m equal to the task, as you like to say.”

“The twins and I always appreciate having our sayings repeated back to us.”

“It’s an American trait, you haven’t figured that out yet?”

“I can’t learn everything in 16 months you know.”

“Try harder.”

“Yuck, yuck. So how are you doing, really? I mean after this afternoon and everything.”

“I’m glad you guys were there, let’s put it that way.” Harry was glad about that too.

“Never fear mate, we always will be.” With that, he shoved a smiling Drew into the floo, where he left for the island. Harry quickly followed, morbidly hoping that Marie might be having a nutty.

Not so fast Harry, Marie was one large smile as she walked outside and took in the view.

And it was some view. The sand was warm and the water was beautiful, and one needed omnioculars to see the nearest island, which was over three miles away. It was nighttime, but the moon was bright, and the night was gorgeous. Sophie was telling Marie the story behind Isla de Marauder, including it's name, as the ladies got out the beach towels and put them in place. Jonas and Warrick were getting some pre-placed snacks ready when Dobby came in. He was looking even more pale than normal as he walked over to Harry and handed him a small white envelope.

“Harry, this message was just delivered to Fred and George at the shop.”

Harry was about to open the envelope when he thought of something.

“Isn't it 3:00 am there or something?”

“Twin Fred said that someone banged on the door until Lee came, and then vanished, leaving this envelope. It is devoid of any charms whatsoever, and had no portkey attached.” The lip of the envelope was tucked under, and it looked like the seal had been broken. Dobby anticipated the question.

“Yes, the twins have read it.”

Harry had no issue with that, what was his was theirs. He opened the envelope and took out the note. It was short and to the point.

Dear Harry,

Greetings to you Harry, I hope you are having a good Thanksgiving Holiday. No doubt your close friend Scrimgeour informed you of our

capture of Azkaban. No need to congratulate us, it was our pleasure. Among our booty in the capture was one Delores Jane Umbridge, who was more or less intact after her months of captivity. I am aware of your connection with her, and I thought perhaps you would be willing to do business.

If you would like possession of this prize, all it will take is 500,000 galleons, and she will be delivered in the gift wrapping of your choice, to the place of your choice. I would advise against choosing your shop though, as it is under constant Auror surveillance, in case you were unaware of it.

If your reply is no, no harm no foul, as the muggles might say, simply burn this note or chuck in your bin. If the answer is yes, send a regular post owl to me and we will arrange something, no need to risk Hedwig, though of course I wouldn't dream of harming your first pet. It will all be done by portkey, so no traps if you don't mind.

Think about it Harry, I look forward to hearing from you,

Peter Pettigrew

Harry read the note twice, and passed it to Drew, who read it and passed it to the other guys, none of whom seemed to notice Harry's hands shaking for a couple dozen seconds.

"What else did the twins say?"

"Only that you should not do it Harry, and if you do not mind me saying, I agree with them."

"I don't mind you saying it at all Dobby, you're a member of the firm just like everyone else." Jonas was last to read it, and handed it back to Harry.

"Dobby, please show this note to the ladies, they're outside on the beach." Dobby walked outside and did what Harry wanted him to, his reward was to be almost run over by Sophie as she ran back in.

“Is this for real?”

“It’s the traitor’s handwriting, I remember it from the note he sent to The Kindred guy, Frankel.” Frankel still sent Voldemort updates on Harry’s Flackter trips, though no one knew if the bad man actually believed that the vampires were still working for him, and not against him.

“And what are you going to do?”

Harry’s reply was immediate and forceful:

“Send the note to Rufus and see if he wants to try and set up a trap. I wouldn’t pay 50 galleons for that bitch, let alone 500,000. My morals have become more complex over the last few years, but I’m not about to do this trade unless specifically instructed to by Rufus and Travis, and even then only if it’s not my money in play.” The other women had come in during this speech, and had heard every word of it.

And if Harry did not know better, he could have sworn that he heard multiple sighs of relief in the room. Certainly Dobby looked relieved as he took back the note from Claudia.

“I am to go to The Minister now Harry?”

“Well let the guy sleep some, no need to wake him up for this. Wait until morning over there and then do it. Tell him that I’ll go along with what he wants, with the proviso that I not pay a Knut.” At least Pettigrew, and it was his handwriting that had made Harry’s hands start shaking, took care of any danger to the shop.

“Yes Harry, it will be done.”

“You know, I thought I was done with that woman. She was safely in Azkaban being tormented, it was a nice thought.” His tone was half wistful and half exasperated, even though he appeared to be smiling.

“Like a bad penny she is. Did you figure on something like this when you heard the news about the takeover?”

“No Claudia, I just figured that she would take the Dark Mark and be killed off in the next battle, it’s not like she can fight at all. She can barely even slap someone, let alone do anything else to them.” This salvo got a weak chuckle from the others, even Marie, who had been fully and completely briefed on Umbridge by Ginny while at The Hollow, the only one of the gang never to lay direct eyes on the hag.

Harry shook his head a few times, and motioned everyone out the door.

“C’mon, we’re here to relax, so let’s relax. This is not going to affect us one bit, so let’s not worry about it.” Everyone took him at his word, and changed into swimwear for a late night turn in the ocean. No sharks nearby thankfully, as there had yet to be a spell designed to ward them off, or at least they hadn’t heard of any, or read about them in the Black Library. A fun evening was had by all, as Warrick and Harry built a nice fire on the beach and toasted marshmallows and s’mores were the order of the evening, with Winky’s special apple cider to wash it all down with. For the night they were just teenagers partying on the beach.

The next day Harry got a missive from Rufus saying that they had already turned down an offer of 200,000 galleons to buy back Umbridge.....Pettigrew had tried for a touchdown with Harry, wanting an extra 100,000. Rufus asked for a quick meeting, and Harry flooded back to the shop in time for a 15 minute meeting with Rufus, and no one but Rufus as they drank some Snapple in the shop’s living quarters and talked. The upshot was that Rufus had decided that doing some kind of a trap was a trap in and of itself, it was just what the Death Eaters wanted. Plus it might encourage a series of kidnappings. If The Ministry paid 200,000 galleons or Harry 500,000 galleons for someone that they all hated, what would they pay for someone that they loved? Or at least respected and/or valued. It was a slippery slope.

“No Harry, it’s just too much trouble for too little payoff.”

“That’s fine by me sir, I would have only done it if you insisted.”

“Good man. Now there is something else I need to tell you, though this will not directly impact you for the time being.”

He proceeded to tell his protégé about Plan Delta and the hiding of the magical population. Harry had two very salient questions:

“What about those people who refuse it? Who won’t go under Fidelius.”

“You mean the willful sitting ducks?”

“Those are the ones, yeah. I can’t see the downside to it, but I’m sure that some will refuse just so that they can say that they refused to kowtow to The Ministry.” Harry was surprised by Rufus starting to laugh.

“You have a very good grasp of human nature Harry, I can’t wait until you’re Minister of Magic 30 years from now. The simple answer is that we won’t be able to protect them, and they will be made aware of that, with the attendant consequences. So far we’re in Stage Two, the bulk of the Ministry employees and the human employees of Gringotts, which of course includes Bill and Fleur Weasley. So far no one has refused, but I would be shocked if someone did not do exactly as you said.”

Harry’s other question was a little more sticky:

“Doesn’t Plan Delta just encourage Voldemort to go after the muggles? I mean he would have nowhere else to turn if he wanted some ready-made mayhem.”

“It might, but Travis and I are hoping that it will encourage him to do something rash and attack The Ministry again, or Diagon Alley. We have multiple defenses set up at both locations, and it would be nice to bleed him of some more troops. Hogwarts is perfectly safe, it only takes five seconds to put the castle into lockdown, and there should be more than enough warning before that happens. Plus our friend Remus has put in a few extra wards and booby-traps, just in case.”

“Glad to hear it, it should be an interesting Winter to say the least.”

“I know just what you mean Harry.”

“How is Remus doing as Headmaster? The others rave about him, but you’re probably more objective than they are.”

“By all accounts he is doing very well Harry, he’s keeping the car on the road, if you will. It helps that most of his would be troublemakers are expelled, though unfortunately now free to cause trouble. McGonagall seems to have accepted it now, she must like the position of Deputy a lot better than either Remus or I had envisioned.”

“And Dumbledore?”

“He’s now a full-time Wizengamot head, along with his Order work. I won’t say that the black has gone back into his beard, but he does look more relaxed that I can recall seeing him in a long time.”

“Then it was all for the best.”

“Yes, amazingly enough. Now I have to get back to the office, and you have some more relaxing to do I’m betting. Stop by and see me during your Christmas Break and we’ll have another update.” He was surprised that Harry didn’t ask about the Voldemort correspondence, but The Minister did not view that as such a bad thing under the circumstances.

“You can assume that a dinner invitation will be forthcoming as well, we’ll probably be here four or five days. Plus I have my thing with McCrae on Boxing Day.” McCrae had been keeping up to his end of the unofficial deal, barely mentioning Harry outside of his Quidditch game, and The Daily Prophet had given great reviews to WWW’s new product lines.

“Good, if you could learn to tolerate him, and vice versa, it would be a load off my mind.”

“You don’t show it, you’re the most calm person I’ve ever met, even more so than Arthur.” Echoing Bones’ feelings without knowing it, and Rufus smiled.

Both of them rose, Harry hadn’t bothered with a coat so he didn’t need to put one on now.

“It keeps people on their toes Harry, and disconcerts them. Though your mix of calm and passion has it’s upside as well. Take care Harry, see you next month.”

“Take care sir.”

They both left, Rufus to a meeting with Diggory and Dumbledore, Harry to a sun soaked beach with not a school book or anything of the like in sight. Ah to be young, rich, and magical.

Tuesday, December 2, 1997

Controversy Conference Room, Great Lakes Basement Level

10:30 am

It was time to plan for the Cortez defense, each school was told that a minimum of six weeks would be in between each of the defenses, and that Christmas Break would count as part of the six weeks if that’s how the cookie crumbled. They had waited this long to do the planning because it was a given that Murray and Heyman needed to be there to sign off any changes to the normal defenses, and this was the first class time that their schedules were in sync.

No, not the band.

Drew, as was becoming the norm, led off the discussion:

“Now here’s the thing, we have to assume that that Jackson guy from Salem is going to leak out to the other schools what we did when we were on the offensive, he kind of seems like the vindictive

type. So we have to prepare for the fact that some of our tactics are about to be thrown in our faces. Harry, what news do you have about the swamps?”

“The twins just got orders for 20 swamps each through our Tecumseh and Pathfinder pipelines. It’s mad money, but something is going down. Steve Atwood and Sarah Hoerauf both told me, through Dobby, that the orders were spread out among Seniors, and Juniors with close associations with Seniors.”

“Is there a counter we can use?” This was Amanda Knight, arguably the one in the room who knew the least about WWW and its products.

And that was the problem, as there was a counter. But the twins regarded it as a trade secret and would only tell Harry, and no one else. If any of the students manufacturing the swamps accidentally set one off, Luna and Dennis Creevey were the prime ones doing them now, they were instructed to send for Dobby and have him take care of it. The problem was, that required going to Remus and asking to floo the twins, who would send Dobby, and it really was one giant headache that thankfully had only happened one time when Luna slipped and put the wrong hand down to steady herself. It wasn’t a ‘Luna moment’ or anything of the like, just something that could have happened to anyone. Customers who deployed the swamps for pranking had to clean it up the old fashioned way, which took a bit of time. The Great Lakes attackers the month before had not been allowed the charm either, they were forced to use some hardcore Cleaning Spells, and Knight had clearly been hoping for a way around that.

Harry figured that the best way to do this was to tell the truth.

“Yes there is a deactivation spell, but I’m not allowed to give it out. We’ll just have to work around it, or have me on swamp detail.” Harry had no trouble telling Sophie or the rest of the gang members either in a non-class situation, but he did not want that line drawn too firmly right now, there was already a sense from the non-gang members in the class of a difference in levels.

This was the answer that most of them had been expecting though, business was business and the twins had been a huge help in the Salem attack, so Drew moved on.

“Fair enough. Professor Murray, what are we allowed to do to the outside?”

“Nothing that would imperil any students wandering around out there, and there are always some at most times at night, whatever the weather. You can do whatever you like to the outside walls, as long as every student is made aware that touching them is bad news. You can put timers on the other wards though, there is a way to do that.” Everyone in the gang who was there looked right at Harry, that was one of his prime pranking M.O’s. Not that he would admit that to anyone outside the family.

“I have a way to do that. Now the rules of the contest say that the school can be hit at any time of day, but they would be fools to do it during the daylight hours when the entire school can be marshaled on a moment’s notice. So we can set them to be active between midnight and 7:00 am, and just warn everyone to go outside during that time period at their own peril.

Heyman was nodding.

“The weather will help there, which is why I think Tecumseh will be hit next, since there are fewer weather issues there than here or Pathfinder. Going up the Pathfinder mountains in the Winter would be horrific, and it’s even colder here, even if we are on level ground. Warming Charms only do so much.” They all thought on the logic of this for a moment, for all the derision Greenleaf and Ripley had for Heyman, he really was a smart guy. Ripley nodded approvingly at his sometime foe’s remark:

“I agree with Professor Heyman completely, but logic might not win out here, Jacobson might use that to screw with us, figuring that with our talent level, we should be ready for anything. Now what we have to do first is examine our own plan and plug those holes. Harry, does

anyone outside this school, in America anyway, know how to do The Pink? Or even know about it period?"

Holy crap, that was the answer to a lot of questions, and everyone in the room brightened up. Ripley was a respected teacher for a reason you know.

"Not as far as I know, unless my British friends have suddenly acquired some non-Great Lakes pen pals that I don't know about, or someone in Cortez saw the Clancy episode and started blabbing about it. Are you thinking about the air duct?" The one at Great Lakes was near Harry's plants as it happened, so he knew just where it was.

"At the very least. Now I know we can't get a blood sample from everyone in the school.....or can we Joanne? The med station has that kind of thing don't they?"

Murray hated to tell them no, but there were lines that she would not allow them to go across. In fairness though, that's why she and Heyman were in the meeting in the first place, to delineate those lines.

"They do, but I don't know Tom, there are ethics involved here, doctor-patient confidentiality, even if the doctor is my husband. No, especially if the doctor is my husband. I'm sorry,, best just to do it to the air duct and other hard to get places." Well that was not unexpected, and Ripley had just been making a shot in the dark anyway. Neil Murray's only official Great Lakes duties were doing the physical exams of all the Novices on their first day at school, and all the test results, including a small blood sample for each student, were kept until the student graduated or otherwise left school.

"No matter. Harry, go ahead and Pink the air duct and the roof edges themselves, the roof will now be off-limits to any students but those in this room, until after the attack at least." Yes, there were bold students laden down with blankets and warming charms would go to the roof for their carnal adventures. In some corners of the school, it was seen as a kind of 'rite of passage'.

Though not anymore apparently.

“I’ll have it up this afternoon after Muggle Studies. I’ll need a drop of blood from everyone in order to inoculate you, so that you can go up there when we need you to. In fact, why don’t we all meet up there 30 minutes before dinner and just do it en masse? Any objections?”

No one had any, and all those who had not seen The Pink up close were interested in seeing how it was done. Ripley nodded approvingly at the plan, and moved on:

“Well the roof is taken care of then, excellent, that’s a major intrusion point. We’ll have to make an announcement at dinner of course. What about the front doors?” He turned again to Harry, who had cleared his throat slightly.

“The Pink does NOT work on a timer, just so you know, and believe me, that was one of the first things I tried with it.”

Reiko had a thought there.

“Professor Murray, if it’s clear that we are going to be the last school hit, can we put the Pink all over then? Since there would be a more finite time frame?”

“Yes you can, but again, within reason. Plus we would learn from the other two assaults on how to better defend ourselves. I want you kids.....sorry, you’re all adults now, I apologize. I want you men and women to remember that taking Salem down should not have gone so easily. We lucked out with a complacent staff with no good plan. Tecumseh and Pathfinder will know all about this, and will do their best to exploit things. We can’t let them. We have the finest Basic Combat students in the country, and we need to show them that.”

Silence in the room, and Harry couldn’t resist:

“Wow, I want to go out and box someone or something now.”

Much laughter, as Murray was laughing as hard as anyone.

“Okay, a bit too over the top, I can acknowledge that.”

Discussion returned to planned defenses, until Sophie came up with the best one by far. They had been discussing Steve Atwood’s information, and after Harry blandly threatened to defenestrate anyone even mouthing the name ‘Steve Atwood’ outside this class, Sophie had a thought:

“Why don’t we plant Listening Charms outside their schools? If they leave by the front door to use their portkeys, then we’ll know and can have some warning. They can’t portkey in past the Outer Perimeter, like us at Salem, so we would have at least a couple of minutes warning, even if they’re on brooms like we were.”

The first one to answer her was Drew, who looked right at Murray when he did.

“I love the idea, but are we allowed to go that far? To put charms and such on other schools like that?”

Murray said nothing for a moment, then excused herself briefly. She returned in a couple of minutes with a pair of copies of the rules for the ‘competition’, if one wants to call it that. She slid one over to Ripley and rifled through the other one herself. Ripley was done first:

“I see nothing in there that prevents a school on defense from going on offense. Professor Murray?”

“I concur, that’s a great idea Sophie. Harry, can you have your man at Tecumseh do this? Or should one of us be on site?”

“Well let’s assume for the sake of argument that this isn’t going to happen before Christmas. If it doesn’t, then any one of five of us can do it, since we’ll be visiting there. But yeah, I can have him throw up some, assuming he knows how.” He did, and Atwood was more than happy to oblige, as Harry found out momentarily.

“Dobby!” In he came.

“Yes Harry?”

“Would you happen to know where Steve is right now?” As part of being the delivery supervisor of WWW, Dobby had made it his business to know where all the WWW people were at any given time, at least in their class schedules. Atwood was a Junior, and like Harry and the rest of the gang, was only taking five classes.

“This is his off-period Harry. Do you have a message for him?”

Harry did, and explained what he wanted. Dobby was there and back in a couple of minutes.

“Yes Harry and friends, he does know how and will have them up by the end of the day. I will monitor them and let you know of any developments.” Listening Charms operated out of a magical hub, usually a pensieve or something like it. The Charms too could be set to keywords, in case the planter needed specific information and wanted to separate the wheat from the chaff.

“Great Dobby, thank you.” Dobby left, and the smiles around the table were now very smug, and they weren’t all on the faces of the students either. Murray, though a calm professional, had an ego to stroke here too, and badly wanted to vanquish both schools that Great Lakes would be fighting in this competition. There was one down and the other seemed to be handled as well. This was yet another in a long list of times that she was grateful that she had let Peter Tyson persuade her into taking on the Harry Potter experience. She was doing that as Reiko jarred her back to reality.

“What about Pathfinder? I don’t think our WWW person there is advanced enough to know how to put up Listening Charms, is she?” Sarah Hoerauf was a Sophomore, or Third Year student, so the look on Harry’s face confirmed that Reiko was correct.

“No, in that case one of us needs to be on site. Do they just portkey from inside? How do they get out of there?” Everyone looked to the faculty, who had all been there for conferences and the like. Heyman answered:

“They do portkey and do everything else from inside, there’s a specific entering and leaving area set up for things like that. But it’s warded unless they’re expecting someone to come or go. In a lot of ways Pathfinder is the most secure place in magical America. Makes you wonder why they didn’t build all four schools that way.” That question had been asked more than once since the Lycan attacks, the Pathfinder version of which had barely made a dent in the school other than some minor structural damage, easily repaired. The California based school, named after John C. Fremont, had only been in existence for 83 years, far and away the newest of the four. But as Heyman said, it was the most impregnable. Harry didn’t look too happy.

“That’s just great, our inside girl isn’t eligible for Corrinus Alley trips either, so she would have no reason to be there. Look, if we get the chance, I’ll teach her how to do a Listening Charm myself over the Christmas Break. I’ve taught others how to do it, and she seems pretty sharp from what Dobby says. I’m sure she can pick it up quickly and get it done for us.” If necessary, he would loan her his Invisibility Cloak, or also teach her how to Disillusion herself. Harry wanted this defense to succeed as badly as anyone. He also reasoned that he had taught Neville and Luna each how to do Listening Charms, and Sarah wasn’t that much younger than Luna. The rub was this: Would 13 year old Sarah Hoerauf be willing to do it in the first place? The next day Harry would send Dobby over to her cousin Jennifer Tyson and start the convincing process. Three of the gang’s ten schools were in that area: San Diego State, University of Hawaii, and UCLA, so the gang would be out that way.

The rest of the time was spent speculating on what else they could get away with, but they ultimately felt that the early warning system that they were setting up would be their best play. All they needed was some advance notice, and they were golden. At least they sure hoped so.

After the meeting, Murray took Harry aside for a moment.

“I’ve been meaning to talk with you about something. According to Jessica, no one seems to believe that she had anything to do with the attack. Good job.”

“She said the same to me, through Dobby. That’s good, I was hoping that there wouldn’t be any blowback that way.”

“Will Tecumseh use Reiko that way?”

“They would if she wasn’t a direct part of the defense I’m sure, but Hill and Burke undoubtedly know what she thinks of them, so I’ll bet you a dollar that they won’t ask.” He wasn’t really serious about the bet, but Murray stuck out a well manicured hand immediately.

“I’ll take that action.” They shook on it, and the unique relationship became even more so, though it wasn’t the first time Harry had bet with a teacher, Josh Lyman was now a semi-regular at their twice weekly poker games in the trunk. Still, Harry was having visions of him making a bet with Dumbledore, and even his active imagination just could not get there.

“It has to be a written request though, not some half-assed thing through Karl or Lisa.”

“Fair enough, and don’t pay me off in pennies when you lose.”

“Why do I get the idea that your husband does that?”

“You know what doctors are like.”

“I thought that they just played golf?”

“In this latitude? He needs something to while away the time when it’s hip deep in snow out there.”

“He can’t floo to the golf course?”

“Time for lunch Harry, go fill that bottomless pit you call a stomach.”

“Just don’t try to raise my fees because I eat so much.”

“I would have if I could have, Peter Tyson didn’t mention that in our chat.”

Both smiling, they left the basement and went to lunch.

Saturday, December 13, 1997

Flackter Alley, Milwaukee

10:00 am

This was the Christmas shopping Flackter trip, and all of the Juniors and Seniors going on this trip, which would be every single one of the eligible, were eagerly awaiting Murray’s instructions for their second and last trip of the term.

“Alright folks, be good, stay out of trouble, and be good. Have a great trip.” Short and sweet.

This is why they all loved Murray, the most popular Head of the school in a long, long time.

Marie was off with her roommates, having spent the October Flackter trip with the gang, part of the unofficial custody arrangement that had taken shape. She still hadn’t blabbed about the trunk floo, so Harry’s blood pressure was still around normal as he watched her portkey off with her friends. Drew was sticking with the gang this time, so it was seven strong that went into Flackter Alley.

But not for long, as they immediately exited the magical part of Milwaukee and entered the muggle domain. It wasn’t that the allure of Flackter had paled.

Well, yes it had. Having Dobby and Winky available at a second’s notice to get them things there had rather spoiled them, and even Marty and Keisha were benefiting by it, as Harry had let them in on

that part of the gang's activities. He felt it was a just reward for them doing well with their WWW work, the supervision of which had completely been transferred now to Rachel Kessler, with Harry only being the FAQ guy. Dobby rather liked Keisha, while perversely Winky preferred Marty, and both kids treated the elves with all the friendliness they could, often playing UNO with them in the Cortez or Shawnee Lounges on a Sunday afternoon.

The seven of them went out to lunch first, at their favorite franchised Mexican eatery, and there they discussed what the present limits were this year. Everyone had agreed at the start of term that birthdays were just to be cards and a party this time, boyfriends and girlfriends excepted of course, the 18th birthday not being a big deal in magical culture. So there was more money available for Christmas, especially since all of them were on the WWW payroll for at least five hours a week doing some manufacturing. Indeed most of their work never left school, it was used for Great Lakes only orders.

Harry had no idea what to buy Sophie, and Sophie knew that she could never top the picture pocket watch that she had gotten Harry last year....he only took it off at night or for working out. So as they were walking along the street toward the big mall, Sophie had a thought.

“You know that jewelry store excursion we were talking about before?”

“Yeah? You want to do it today?”

“I’m thinking we should wait until February and the Flackter trip then.”

Harry was now the one caught off-guard, and as casually as he could:

“Why then?”

“Harry, I love you very much and I will certainly say yes when you do it. But there’s going to be at least one Weasley wedding in a

couple of weeks, or so we think, and Ron is probably going to propose and all, and who knows with Warrick and Reiko.....let's just let them have the spotlight solely on themselves for that time. And then we can have the spotlight just on us in March, on my birthday." A more broad hint had never been laid on Harry's doorstep, and with a visible relief he started nodding.

"That works for me. You had me panicked there for a split second you know."

"The shoe's on the other foot Mister, you've done that to me a time or two."

"Yeah, but I didn't know better then."

Harry let go of her hand and put his arm around her, drawing her as close as their thick parkas would let them.

"Harry, have I mentioned that I love you lately?"

"About 20 seconds ago, that sure was a long time in between. I love you too."

Warrick had slowed down just enough to interrupt them.

"Would you two knock it off, you're embarrassing the kids up there."

"Ice water Warrick, hypothermia."

That was Harry's standard threat response to Warrick's sarcasm, said with a smile of course. It had the desired effect, as while Warrick and Reiko now 'set up shop' in the second trunk, they were just as vulnerable to a Harry prank as ever. Not that he had ever done one, the threat by itself was a lot funnier.

"You two take as much time as you like then." He hurried off, to the collective giggles of Harry and Sophie. Harry wanted to clarify something before they joined the others:

“So we’re only postponing so as to assuage tender feelings amongst our friends, right?”

“Exactly. You’re still going to be stuck with me for a very long time.”

“So when your parents and Arthur and Molly question us?”

“We’ll just tell them to stay tuned. Or we’ll take Molly and Arthur aside and tell them the truth, that would probably be easier.”

“I’m trying to figure out how to explain the Weasleys to your father.” Only vague mentions of them had occurred in August.

“I’m more worried about how we’re going to pull off a wedding that’s half magical, half muggle. My dad will want a lot of his friends and legal people there, to show off. How do we pull that off?”

“We don’t, we just have two ceremonies.”

“Um.....no. One is going to be hard enough. We’ll just make sure that our magical friends know enough to be discrete among our muggle guests.” Neither Sophie nor Harry had any muggle friends at present, in fact Harry had never truly had a muggle friend period, so the muggles at the event would be Weir family members and people Peter and Wendy invited.

“I’ll just make sure that Rufus has some Obliviators handy, just in case.”

“Feel free, he would have probably done it anyway, just in case.” Sophie was the polar opposite of Hermione when it came to Rufus Scrimgeour, she liked him, and thought that while he was certainly running his own agenda, it was an agenda which dovetailed with Harry’s quite nicely. They were interrupted again, this time by Drew, who for some reason got between them and slung his arms around them both. Before either of them could ask him what the heck was going on, he volunteered it.

“We have some weeds in our garden.” Every time the gang was out in public they had Dobby and Winky both shadowing them, one in front and one behind. A lesson learned from the London trip, the mystery of who had been following them had never been solved, the weeds in the garden reference had been appropriated from Rufus. Nor would the London mystery ever be figured out, since it was a Death Eater since killed in the Azkaban takeover. It was Drew’s turn to get the updates on this trip, the job rotated, and he was perfectly casual about it.

“How many?”

“Two that Dobby is sure of. They were waiting for us outside of the gateway, and haven’t left our tail since.”

“How sure is sure?”

“He wouldn’t bet a life, if that’s what you’re asking. But he seems sure about it.” One thing about Dobby in these situations: he was never wrong. Once more, Harry knew that, and decided to take his major-domo’s word for it.

“What do you think Drew?”

“I say we do our business and then nail them on the way back. That way we’ll know beyond a shadow of a doubt. Dobby said that he marked them both, so even if they change via Polyjuice, we’ll know if they’re still with us.” The markings were the same as the one he had placed on Fred and George, for elves’ eyes only.

Harry was on the other side of Drew from Sophie, but he could hear her muttering her agreement to the plan. Harry responded quietly:

“It’s a plan, and I know the perfect ambush spot on the way back. Just be ready, and no one goes anywhere in the mall without at least two others. Let’s walk a little more quickly and join the others.” He was really regretting that he had not thought of some sort of signal system for things like these, but the milk was spilt on that issue. He used his pocketed wand to discreetly check them for charms, but

found nothing. Drew jerked his head a few times and seemed to be implying that he had done the same up front, and likewise found nothing.

They did catch up, and once in the mall, pretty much pushed the stalkers to the backs of their minds. Shopping was now in the forefront, at least for a few hours. The groups split up into two, by gender, and the women headed right for a boutique, while the boys went right for an electronics store.

Harry wound up purchasing his first DVD player, one of the first models to come out. It was expensive as all get out, and there were relatively few discs available, but he didn't care. The others decided that portable CD players would be the gift of choice this year, and all four of the guys bought them, with Sophie, Marie, Reiko, and Claudia as the destinations. Harry's was going to Marie, so he had one down. He and Warrick went in together and got Jonas a nice stereo, and Drew and Jonas did the same for Warrick. They liked the idea of combining presents so much that they decided to do it more often during the day. The three guys not named Harry all got The Boy Who Lived some new discs for his DVD player, so he was all set.

Meanwhile the women took surprisingly little time in picking out outfits for each other, finding the right thing right away, including some nice stuff for Marie. Indeed they were out of Marvin Dresslar's Clothing Emporium before the guys left the electronics store. They decided to wait until they got to Britain to shop for the boys who weren't their boyfriends. All eight gang members were kicking in for a Playstation and some games, to be shared by Marty and Keisha.

The rest of the afternoon flew by, as books were bought, music was purchased, and Harry had finished his shopping list for everyone near his age, both Americans and Brits. Still, the thought of their watchers had not faded from Harry's mind, and it did take a little of the joy out of spending money.....something he normally loved to do. He had just picked out a nice Van Gogh print for Bill and Fleur when Sophie came to find him.

"You ready yet?"

“Just this last thing, and no, I don’t have yours yet so don’t bother to feel around in my pockets.” That last phrase could be taken several different ways, and Jonas happened to be standing next to Harry trying to hold off laughter.

“Don’t go there Mister, at least not in public.” She pulled him close for a hug, and smilingly whispered in his ear:

“Our weeds just won’t go away, are you ready for them?” The two gender groups had met for a quick snack halfway through the shopping, where Harry had surreptitiously spread his plan to the others. It was rather detailed for something off the cuff, but they all liked it.

“Yes ma’am.” He pulled away and kissed her, before bringing the five prints he was going to buy up to the cashier. He loved this art store, and usually bought at least three or four things during each Flackter trip. He was not on his way to becoming an art collector however, he figured that buying a print was not only cheaper, but safer. Safer in that for all his grace on a broom, Harry was a bit clumsy still, and some accidental magic might damage a \$100,000 painting beyond repair..

The gang left the mall with about 45 minutes to spare, and it was a 20 minute walk back to the gateway and the portkey area, so they had to do this quickly. Harry had spotted an alleyway about 2/3 of the way back to the gateway, and hoped that the weeds would be gullible enough to believe the story he was about to throw at them.

“Hey guys, let’s go this way, it’s a shortcut that Terry was telling me about. It’ll save us five minutes getting back.” Lot’s of:

“Sounds good.”

They headed down the bright alleyway, which was nothing more than the backdoors of a lot of businesses, mostly restaurants in this part of town. Sure enough, the weeds went with them, more out of curiosity than anything else. Once halfway down the alley, which was of course not actually a shortcut, Harry bent down to tie his shoe, which

conveniently had come undone. The two followers were about 15 meters behind them, both carrying shopping bags from the mall. As he finished up, he started muttering the countdown:

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

He fell to his left side and whipped both wands out:

“Accio Wand! Accio Wand!” The wands of the two weeds flew towards him, hitting him on the chest, as he did not have a free hand with which to catch them.

That was the cue for the others to do their part, as six wands flashed:

“STUPEFY!”

All six hit their targets, four on one man and the other two on his companion. They were out like the proverbial lights before they had a chance to Apparate or portkey away, and thankfully no muggles had seen anything. Drew ran toward them and quickly putting up a couple of Muggle Repelling Charms, ensuring some privacy. Harry walked up to the bodies and gave them the once over. He didn't recognize either of them, nor did they have Polyjuice flasks anywhere on their persons. The builds were very, very familiar though, and they did have wands in their pockets, as well as objects that could be portkey material, and no one dared touch those. He took one wand and pointed it at it's owner:

“Finite Incantatem.”

The Disguising Charm quickly disappeared. Harry was now looking at Vincent Crabbe Jr., fresh out of captivity at Azkaban. Drew had seen what he was doing and did the same with the other man.

Gregory Goyle the younger.

“Holy shit.” Harry said this quietly, but everyone heard him as they rushed up. No one knew who these two were until Harry named them, he had not pointed them out during his pensieve memory of the October assassination aftermath.

“Drew, Sophie, please put up some anti-Apparition and anti-portkey wards. Claudia, Warrick, if you could tie them up for me please.” Reiko, not asked to do anything, went a little wide-eyed at hearing those instructions.

“You’re going to question them here? Just let Drew’s dad do it.” Besides, they only had 20 minutes to get back, but she didn’t mention this.

“I won’t need much time, and I’ll leave enough of them for Mitchell to interrogate.” This was said in what Warrick usually referred to as Harry’s ‘Grim Reaper’ voice, a voice he used when talking about Death Eaters, Voldemort, and sometimes the Dursleys.

Reiko just shrugged and didn’t argue with him. Not because she was afraid of him mind you, but because once Harry used the Reaper voice, there was no talking him out of much of anything.

Once everything was warded and everyone necessary was trussed up, Harry woke up Crabbe and Goyle.

“Hi guys, long time no see.”

Crabbe was the spokesman:

“Potter.”

“Got you, didn’t I?”

“Don’t take all the credit, there are seven of you.”

“It was a royal ‘I’ Vince. So, are you here to kill me, or just tail me? No, don’t answer that, you wouldn’t tell me the truth anyway.” This

was now officially the longest conversation he had ever had with either of Draco's former goons.

"Then why did you ask? Just shut up and hand us over to the Aurors, you know you will anyway." Crabbe was too stupid to understand just how much danger he was in at present, but he was more or less correct in predicting the eventual outcome. Luckily for him.

"Repulsar." Right to the groin of Goyle, from one foot away. Crabbe saw that and began having Nott flashbacks, Theo would probably never procreate because of Harry's demonstration back in October, and in the brief time he had been free, Crabbe had heard all about it.

"What the hell did you do that for?!"

"For you making demands when you're not in a position to do so. And for your attitude. Repulsar!" A bit harder this time, and again at Goyle, this time to his stomach.

"Stop it!"

"Why? Wouldn't you do worse to me?"

Crabbe could see where this was going and wisely kept his mouth shut, no answer would be the right one. Harry leaned over to him, and whispered so that only he could hear him.

"If my friends weren't here, I'd make you howl for a thousand years Vince. But I have to set an example, which is the only reason your blood isn't flowing. Now just remember who's boss here, and you will live through this. Of course what Biller and Cleburne do to you will probably hurt a little." Hearing those names made Crabbe even more pale than he already was, the cold wasn't helping him right now, that's for sure. He croaked out a docile:

"Okay."

Harry rose up, the others could readily guess the topic of all that whispering.

“Now, let’s get you to the Aurors. Dobby!”

Dobby didn’t need to pop, he was right there, hiding behind Drew.

“Yes Harry? Shall I go get Drew’s father?”

“Please.” The shocked looks on the faces of the others were very genuine. Two little Pulse spells and Harry was letting them go. And not just any Death Eaters, but ones that he had a long and up close history with. Once they collected themselves though, they would be very relieved that Harry didn’t torture anyone right in front of them.

Dobby was away, and back in a few seconds.

“He is coming.”

Coming was right, Mitchell Baylor got there in about a minute, with his protégé Brian McCann and crew with him. Mitchell looked around at the scene.

“So you have some more spies for us eh? You do know that we don’t give bounties or anything like that don’t you Harry?”

“I’d be a rich man if you did Mitchell. Meet Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, two of my old schoolmates.” All of the Aurors perked up at the name Goyle, since they were the ones who had taken Goyle’s father the year before.

“Like father like son I see. They were two of the escapees from Azkaban if I recall correctly.”

“You do indeed, and they’re all yours.”

“Good, I’m sure that they know some things that can be useful. I’ll get you a transcript after we ship them off, since you got them for us. Your man Scrimgeour should be well pleased with you.”

“I’m earning my salary.” He was kidding, meaning the tutoring he had arranged for all of his friends.

“And they’re all trussed up too, I love it when we can arrest people and not do any work at the same time.” He motioned for his men to gather the prisoners, but first Harry had a thought.

“Hang on a second please Mitchell. Dobby, would you go get my other wand for me please?” The Tom Riddle Special.

“Sure Harry.” He was there and back in seconds, knowing just where Harry kept it hidden. He handed it to Harry, and the young man advanced on Crabbe.

“Brian, could you roll up his right sleeve for me please?”

McCann had no idea what was going on here, but did it anyway, figuring it would be worth seeing. The rolling up of the sleeve revealed the Dark Mark that Crabbe had recently gotten, no longer needing to be a covert sympathizer.

“No need to pee your pants Vince, I’m just confirming something.” He put the tip of the wand on the Dark Mark, and Crabbe started screaming.

A not altogether unpleasant sound for Harry’s ears, but he immediately stopped.

All throughout Azkaban, The Azores, and a few scattered places in Europe: Death Eaters grabbed their arms in pain, and those outside Azkaban immediately began the journey back to the new home base.

Only thing was, Voldemort had not called for them.

That was Harry’s theory, that the Dark Marks were attuned to the wand, not the man. He had heard the report from Parrish, via Rufus, that the Dark Mark call did not work as well without this wand, at least with older Death Eaters who had been recruited before the Malfoy

trial and Harry's scam of his own wand's mate. It was nice to have that theory confirmed, and it was, perhaps, something that could be used as a tool for later. He wouldn't know it of course, but Voldemort had been furious, though a tiny part of him respected the deviousness of the idea, along with a grudging admiration.

Harry now proceeded to stun the two goons again, so that he could explain to the others what he was up to, without having to whisper it. They were all intrigued, with Mitchell in particular nodding thoughtfully as McCann and company took the prisoners over to Auror Command, which was less than a mile away.

"I'll let your people back in Britain know about all this, officially. I imagine you'll want Dobby to have your partners notify them too."

"Can you talk about this kind of thing over the phone?"

"No, we'll send someone over on the portkey run ahead of everything. Just too risky otherwise. We really should have a code or something, but this kind of thing has rarely come up in the past." Echoing Harry's own lament from earlier.

"Then yes, I'll send Dobby over there, from what I gather Rufus doesn't go to bed early. So Dobby can carry your message if you want him to." It was now approaching 11 pm in Britain, though there was always someone on duty at The Ministry.

"Good point, I hadn't thought of that. I'll send them over in our morning, first thing. So have Dobby tell them that, and to expect us sometime around 3:00 pm their time. We'll probably do a few questions under Veritaserum tonight, but nothing that would be germane to your situation over there. Just procedural matters about how they got here, any other criminal activities that they might have been up to. Things like that." He was speaking as much to Dobby as Harry, and the little fellow was nodding.

"Yes Mr. Baylor, I will tell them all of this."

“More efficient than the phone, I’ll say that. Anyway, you have five minutes to reach the portkey area folks, though I’m sure Joanne would excuse you for this.” They all looked at their watches, and agreed that it would be best to be on time, so after handshakes and a father-son hug, they all started running for the gateway, which was half a mile away. Dobby popped back to the trunk, where he flooed to The Hollow and interrupted the twins and their ladies.....

At, well Dobby wasn’t sure what they were doing, only that it wasn’t ‘physical’. He quickly explained the situation, and the twins immediately took the trunk floo over to the shop, where they used the real floo to contact Rufus, who was very happy to be interrupted by this news.

“We’ll make sure they don’t escape this time.”

Neither twin thought that Rufus would tell them where the new prison was, so they didn’t ask.

“Yes sir. Any message for Harry?”

“Just give him and his American friends our thanks, and tell him I’ll see him next week when he comes over.” The gang would spend the few days between the Yule Ball and Christmas Day in Wales, then go back to America to do their college tour. Rufus had been informed of this already, for security reasons.

“Will do sir, have a good night.”

“Thanks guys.” A well satisfied Minister of Magic left the floo, smiling all the while.

By Harry’s watch, the gang made the portkey area by 40 seconds, so they got back to school just in time to see Heyman looking at his watch. They quickly explained what had happened, and Heyman couldn’t help but be impressed. He promised to relay the information to Murray, who was having a special dinner that night with Doc Neil, as it was their anniversary, so it would not be politic to disturb them just then, or for the rest of the night. All the Seniors immediately

blanched when they heard this, having almost yanked her out of that, but all was well that ended well.

The next morning Murray would just shake her head, and immediately talk to her husband about getting a house elf bodyguard/major domo/shadow for Jessica, as it seemed to make Harry so much safer. Neil reminded his wife that Jessica was barely known outside her school, and that she would probably have an issue with just who the elf reported to. Joanne maintained that she wasn't really serious about it, but privately decided to explore the possibility.

Sunday, December 14, 1997

Harry's trunk

10:00 am

It was letter time, as Dobby came back from Hogwarts with letters from Remus, Neville, Luna, and Hermione. Hermione's was the most revealing:

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letter, and for the Defense tips and tactics included. This will really help with the DA, as I'm sure Neville will tell you if it's his turn to write. We went again to Remus and asked him if he would allow some sort of mock assault like you lot are doing over there, but he would not relent. His upshot was that since Hogwarts is liable to be attacked at any time by our real enemies, we don't need fake ones muddying up the picture.

While I still wish he had said yes, I couldn't bring myself to try to counter that particular argument. Still, it would have been very educational, perhaps when the war is over we can revisit it. Neville is coming up with a castle defense plan, using The Marauder's Map, it's his new off-study project.

Harry, if it's okay, I would like to join you on at least a little part of your college tour. I got my acceptance letters to all of your schools, please thank Jonas' father for including me in whatever influence he brought

to bear. No wait, I'll include a note to him for Dobby to 'post', or Dobby-gram I believe you call it. I'm not saying that I'll be going to university over there, but I would like to see where I would be spending four or more years of my life first before I make any permanent decisions.

That I will be doing some form of post-Hogwarts education is a given, if for no other reason than that I have relatively few options that are palatable for me. The Hogwarts positions are full, no one seems to be contemplating retirement, unless Remus and the Board of Governors decide to push Binns out. But I would not want to suggest that to them, ghost or not, I'm sure Binns has an attachment to his job. The Defense job would be nice if Professor Westbrook decides to leave, but I don't see them giving a position of that importance to an 18 year old, no matter what my NEWT score might be. You don't count of course, if they trust anyone our age it's far and away going to be you. I don't much care for the idea of working for The Ministry, there is just something about your friend The Minister that is vaguely disquieting to me, however effectively he seems to be performing. Of course I could always just play Quidditch, but I'm not sure anymore if that's what my future should hold.

See, I have a sense of humor, admit it Harry, you smiled. Please let me know of your itinerary and how to get hold of the necessary portkeys so that I can come over. Ron will not be joining me, the twins are allowing him to work in the shop as much as he wants, but he knows what I am asking for here, and does not object. And no, it didn't really take much of an argument.

I look forward to your next letter as always, have a good Yule Ball, I hope Winky takes a lot of pictures. Take care Harry, we all miss you.

Love,

Hermione

Not for the first time Harry was wondering what life would be like with Hermione around all the time again. He looked around the empty trunk, Sophie having just left to get some clothes, and pondered things. Would Hermione be different with so many other strong

personalities in the mix? There really wasn't a shrinking violet in the bunch except for Drew and maybe Claudia, and neither of them were likely to take well to being bossed. But would Hermione even do that? He had taken an informal poll during the application filling out time, and none of them had even slightly objected to Hermione being the ninth member of the gang, if it came to that. Reiko had even hinted that perhaps young Harry might have exaggerated Hermione's bossiness a little in his stories, and Harry was man enough to admit that she might have a point.

But few of them thought that she could abandon Ron, especially if there was an engagement in the wind. Neither of the lovebirds knew about the trunk system, so either Ron was going to come to America with her, or there would be a break-up. For his part, Harry couldn't imagine Ron willingly leaving Britain, but by the same token, he assumed that his former best mate would follow Hermione to the ends of the earth if necessary. He decided, on his own, to break the news of the trunk floo system to them on Christmas, the campus visits wouldn't start until afterwards anyway, and Harry felt that he could always rationalize the delay by saying:

"Well I wanted to do it in person, so that's why I waited two and a half months after Dumbledore was sacked to tell you."

He knew that while that argument sounded logical on the surface, they would still just focus on the fact that the trunk system had been up and running for 17 months without them knowing about it, and them being the last to know to boot. How far to push the argument was his concern, and he had less than two weeks to think about it. It also didn't escape his attention that they had used a similar argument when he complained that they kept their relationship under wraps. It wasn't the same thing, or so he kept telling himself, but he assumed they would throw it in his face.

Life really was a tangle.

Friday, December 19, 1997

Harry's trunk

Harry and Warrick looked each other up and down. Harry got a crick in his neck doing it, and Warrick noticed as much.

“Would you like a chair to stand on?”

“I’m fine thank you. How much time do we have?”

“If we want to be on time, we should leave now. But they won’t be on time, so we probably have 10 minutes.”

“Let’s leave now then, one day they’re going to surprise us, and we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Excellent point my dear chap.”

“You still wouldn’t fool anyone but a tourist with that accent.”

“Oh really, and how is your American accent? Any better?”

“No, but you notice that I rarely try one.” Harry’s was still terrible.

“Semantics, let’s go.”

They did one last smooth down of their robes and left for the Lounge, which was already full of people in their dress robes, mostly guys waiting for their dates. And Marie, who just smiled and looked at her watch.

“You’re five seconds late boys.”

Warrick just look mutinous, while Harry smiled blandly at him.

“Do the words ‘I told you so’ have any context for you here Warrick?”

“Shut up. You look lovely Marie.”

And she did, in pale pink robes that had just been bought at Flackter Alley six days previous. She had lost the bathroom lottery in her room and had been forced to get ready first. Everyone was gathering in their own Lounge and meeting in the Dining Hall, so they only had to wait for Sophie and Reiko here, and they were just five minutes behind. Sophie was wearing the same robes from a year ago, she had stopping getting taller and was still pretty slim, but they looked great on her still. Reiko had bought new ones in October, a black kind that wouldn't have looked out of place on a Slytherin girl, but looked great on her.

Once in the Dining Hall, they all posed for a group picture, joining Drew, who was holding down a huge table, specially requested for the night. It was to hold the gang and Marie's roommates and Rick and Terry. It was mercifully kept two people smaller by the fact that Jonas and Claudia decided to go together, though Lee had been willing to come. It was decided that it was best to keep it low-key though, and as Claudia didn't really like to dance, she didn't want to drag Lee over on a pointless portkey trip. Jonas was getting more and more into the idea of going out with Ginny, and didn't want to have to answer any more questions than necessary on Christmas, when he would see her next.

This was the last Yule Ball for all of the Seniors, another stop on the nostalgia tour for any high school student, but especially those who go to boarding schools of any kind. The Valentine's Day dance was less than two months out, with many of the same robes, hairstyles, and bad boys' haircuts, but this was still Christmas. The food was better than usual, and usual was very good, and Winky took tons of pictures, including a few large group shots with no less than five people doing rabbit ears behind someone else's head.

Harry had been assured by a pretending to be serious Warrick that colleges rarely had dances, so he decided to dance his skinny butt off all night, since he only had this and one more in his future, not counting weddings. He danced at least twice with every woman at his table, and even insisted on taking Professors Murray and Maloney, his only two female teachers, out for a spin. With Murray, who was tutoring him for an hour every Sunday in Auror tactics, he just simply thanked her for her help and advice. With Maloney, he was intending

to do a hard sell on getting Charlie over here for another visit soon. Until she informed him that she had begun seeing Potions Professor Diego Chavez a few weeks earlier. It helped Harry's conscience when she told him that she was terrified of dragons, so him bringing up the subject earlier would not have helped. An opportunity not squandered, as they say.

After the dance they all got changed back to normal clothes and took Murray's floo over to Tecumseh, where they trunked over to The Hollow just in time to loudly wake up Fred, George, Angelina, and Alicia for some 4:00 am omelets and Snapple.

Harry looked over his living room as the television played, and thought to himself.

“It's good to be home.”

End Chapter

Author's Note: I made a semi-large screw-up in the last chapter when I had Harry use both wands to nail Crabbe and Goyle, then had Dobby go and get the Voldemort wand out of the trunk. Whoops, sorry about that. Let's just change that to say that Harry used his wand to get one enemy wand and wandless magic to get the other one. Oh, I'm aware that certain movies come out later in Britain than in The United States, but for the most popular movie of all-time, we'll assume that it came out the same time in both places.

Saturday, December 20, 1997

The Hollow

Noon GMT

It was a short night of sleep for most of them, but the Americans were determined to fight through floo lag. The eight of them had all crashed on the living room floor in sleeping bags rather than pick out rooms, and there was a lot of stretching and grumbling involved. The twins were already over at the shop, there was a lot to do in the Christmas season, so everyone yawned a lot, and then got ready for their day. Speaking of which, Warrick had a question about that:

“Just what are we doing today Harry?” Since the twins kept the refrigerators full, there was no mass food shopping to do. All of them had some sight-seeing in mind, but assumed that Harry would have a plan of some sort. And indeed he did.

“I figured we could go Death Eater hunting in Knockturn Alley, this is the time of the year when they have to buy presents too you know.” He managed that with a straight face, and couple of people who shall remain nameless actually bought it for a bit.

“Aren't you hilarious? Seriously.”

“I thought we might drop in on Hermione, take her out to lunch and all that.” He had sent Dobby ahead to the Granger residence in Notting Hill to make sure that she would be around. Reiko immediately saw a good reason for the lunch:

“Are you going to tell her about the trunk floo then?”

“Yes, that way there’s eight of us and only one of her.” Not that he expected fireworks, but he really wished that Neville, Luna, and Ginny weren’t all busy with other things today. Still, there was nothing to do but get it over with.

“And you’re going to do it in a crowded restaurant to make sure she doesn’t make a scene?”

Everyone looked kind of strangely at either Harry or Jonas, as Harry had started snickering.

“I’m not breaking up with her Jonas, but no, we’re going to do it at her parents’ place. So we leave in 15 minutes, everyone get going.”

They were all pretty much ready anyway, so they floored over to the shop with time to spare. Ron was working the front, Lee spending the day with his father, and he seemed genuinely pleased to see them all. The shop was busy enough that he didn’t have much time to chat, being the only one upfront for the time being, but he promised to come over to The Hollow later. Harry didn’t mention where they were going, so Ron had no idea that they were going out to the portkey area in the back of the shop to go to Hermione’s. This was nothing but a good thing as far as Harry was concerned, though he knew there would be a bill due later.

They took the portkey, the twins had arranged for a series of them months ago just in case, and arrived in the Granger backyard. Mercifully, no one noticed this, neighbor-wise, so the gang trooped around front and rang the doorbell. Hermione was waiting for them, and immediately opened the door with a big smile.

“Come on in guys, it’s great to see you.” And she too certainly seemed like she meant it, giving Harry a quick hug as they trooped in. The Dr.’s Granger were at their practice, they being the junior partners in the practice and thus being stuck with Saturday duty. Hermione had no siblings, so they had the place to themselves.

There were just enough seats in the living room for them to squat down without any furniture conjuring, and Hermione still had a big smile.

“How was the trip over? Portkeying across the Atlantic must be very interesting.”

Harry liked the fact that she brought that up, there was no time like the present to get this done.

“We didn’t take a portkey Hermione, I only use them for my League meetings, and then only because I get met in Boston by Rob Graham.” To Harry’s ever-loving irritation, but he had not found a way around it yet.

Hermione was nonplussed for a few seconds as she tried to divine Harry’s transportation method without asking. Finally she asked the obvious.

“So you flew over? Isn’t that expensive for all of you?” That Harry was worth millions of pounds sometimes refused to register with her.

“We don’t fly, at least not since the end of school in June, and that was only for the novelty of it.”

“Then how?” She was now at a total loss.

Harry took a deep breath, and then spent a few minutes explaining the trunk floo system to her, and everyone there marveled at how large her eyes got during the presentation. She asked no questions until the end though, much to Harry’s relief.

“So it was just Ron and I that didn’t know about it?” Didn’t need to be a genius to figure that would be the first talking point.

“We told Ginny during the summer, but yes, you and Ron were the only ones.”

“Because of Dumbledore.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you trusted the others.” And there it was, but she didn’t sound too bitter, raising Harry’s hopes.

“They weren’t in Prefect meetings with him, they weren’t close to me while I was there and were subject to Dumbledore’s scrutiny. Now I know you’re going to say that Ginny was, but I doubt the old man would think that I would confide in her, and I really only did that on a whim, since I told her the same time I did Molly and Arthur. It was not about trusting you or not trusting you, it was about trusting your situation.” The looks on the faces of at least Drew and Reiko seemed to wonder if Harry’s point was to try and confuse Hermione. Didn’t work though:

“That’s all so very convoluted of you. Why did you wait so long to tell us? And why is Ron not here?”

“Ron isn’t here because he’s at work, and I have nothing to do with setting his schedule. And why did I not tell you in a letter? Or have Neville or Ginny tell you?”

“Yes, both fair questions.” On the surface, yes.

“I didn’t want to give Ron a reason to go after Neville. I’m not saying who would win, since I don’t really know, but I know there would be a fight of some kind. I wanted to forestall that, no repeats of the Map thing last year. Plus, I doubt you would be terribly happy at me sending in a messenger to do my dirty work.”

“And how do you know there won’t be a Ron and Neville scrap now?” He didn’t really, but barreled on with his pre-planned counter-arguments.

“Because Neville would be ready, and you know that you and Ron probably can’t take those three on and win, if they’re ready.”

“It’s lovely how high your opinion of us is.” Echoes of early July in that one.

“I’m just planning for every contingency, and you really think you could go two on three and win?”

Fortunately for Harry she chose to ignore that last salvo.

“And there are no trunks in the castle?”

“Not right now, no.”

“So you have plans for one then? After we graduate perhaps?”
Ouch, but not an unreasonable assumption.

“Are you aware that Ginny wrote Jonas here a letter?”

“No, she hasn’t said anything about it.” She kind of trailed off as realization hit her, though a small smile was now appearing, temporarily, on her face. She had loved the Howler campaign against Dean, and later on when she thought about it a bit, thought that Ginny and Jonas would make an interesting couple.

“There you go. It’s possible I’ll put one in her dorm room if she and Loverboy here get off the ground. That’s the only reason.”

“But not with me or Ron?”

“Aren’t you busy enough with NEWT studying?” Which ducked the thrust of the question, and Hermione immediately pounced.

“That’s not the point and you know it. We rate lower, that’s why.” Her heart didn’t really seem to be in that particular line of argument though.

“That’s ridiculous and you know it. There’s no trunk in Hogwarts right now because I haven’t dared to risk it, and because I want no bloody part of going there, or a reason to go there. I was almost killed

the last time I was there if you'll recall Hermione, and that was not even close to my first near death experience in that mausoleum. And besides, Dumbledore was smart enough to get around the security features on those things, and there's nothing stopping him from going to my source and just bribing or coercing the backdoor out of him, and there must be one." A backdoor around the security system he meant, and there was one, if Anthony Hook was to speak candidly. Only for his protection of course. Yep.

Hermione then asked what all of them had been expecting her to ask from jump.

"So why tell me now?"

"So that when you come to the States with us for the college tour, you'll know that you won't need any portkeys to get there or back. Look Hermione, you may have been invited late to the party, and I'm very sorry about that, though I stand on my reasons. But once you're there, you'll have the same rights and responsibilities as everyone else. You'll be gang member number eleven." Dobby and Winky were included, and Hermione was sharp enough to catch that right away. Neville, Ginny, and Luna were honorary members, since they did not seem interested in emigrating, however temporarily. Time would tell about Ron.

"What does 'responsibilities' mean?"

"You keep my secrets, whichever secrets I want you to. Like the trunks for example."

"You don't want me to tell Ron?"

"I will this afternoon after he gets off work, but for obvious reasons I wanted you two separate when I did."

"Okay, if that's what you want." The agreement was so sudden it brought Harry up short, which gave Hermione a small measure of satisfaction as he opened and closed his mouth a couple of times.

“Thank you Hermione, you know you put up less of a scrap here than I had feared you would.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It’s very, very good. And again, I’m sorry it took this long. If I had known how easily Rufus could get rid of Dumbledore I would have asked it of him a year ago and none of this would have been necessary.” More than once Hermione had thought the same thing.

“Hindsight and all that. I’m not mad at you for the delay, at least not after a minute or so I wasn’t. Ron will be, just to warn you.”

“Ron doesn’t have a leg to stand on, unlike you.”

That touched her a little, even now. She had always known that she was second to Ron in Harry’s platonic affections, at least until Harry had left. Now she half suspected that Harry put up with Ron mostly because of her. It was an awkward feeling, but on the whole she felt it was a better situation than a year ago at this time.

“All right then, if that’s the way it has to be. I have to ask though, is Ron welcome to live with us in this house you’re going to buy in America?”

“Yes.” To his credit, Harry didn’t hesitate, and she looked very grateful.

“Why buy one at all? We can just live in The Hollow?” Even she had taken to calling it that, Warrick had started it as an obvious play on The Burrow.

“We can, but what if one or more of us invites a muggle home for dinner, or a date or something? We can’t very well ask them to hop in a fireplace can we?”

“Point taken, so you need a place for appearances at the very least. Very logical.”

The rest of the gang was amazed that Hermione hadn't at least smacked him or something, and later on that night Harry would again get a few well chosen:

"Are you sure you didn't exaggerate those Hermione stories just a hair?"

And again, Harry would admit, if only to himself, that he probably had. And the guilt would grow.

When it seemed like there was no more trunk discussion to be had, they all left for lunch, the first meal of the day for all but Hermione. She wound up picking the restaurant, a Greek place that she and her parents swore by. A fun time was had by all, as Harry and Marie both had never had Greek food before, but quickly grew to enjoy it. Hermione was given some more in depth information about the college tour, which had been whittled down to six cities, and would start on December 27. On the walk out of the restaurant, Hermione pulled Harry aside.

"I think I should be there when you tell Ron."

"You should, and I have no problem with that."

"He's still not going to take it well."

"That's his problem. The one thing Ron needs to remember: My things, my rules. I have no trouble sharing my possessions, ask any of 'my American friends' as you so euphemistically refer to them, but if I set conditions, then they need to be met. Not one of them has ever complained either, at least not with a straight face."

"You really have changed Harry."

"No Hermione, my environment changed, I've just evolved. Besides, Ron should be fine with everything after he thinks about it. This way he can play Quidditch in Britain or the States, and be with you either way, whatever you decide. Everybody wins here." Neither of them

really thought that Ron was mature enough to see that right off the bat.

“How illegal is this trunk floo?”

“Anthony Hook told me that it would probably mean 10 years in prison for him, at the very least.” Eyebrows were raised.

“So Rufus doesn’t know?”

“He either doesn’t know, or doesn’t care. Whichever one is fine with me.”

“You like him, don’t you?”

Harry would have thought that the answer to that query was pretty obvious after all this time.

“I do Hermione, I legitimately consider him to be a friend.”

“How is that possible? He’s The Minister of Magic, a fifty-something year old man who you have nothing in common with. Travis I can understand, husband of a Quidditch player, friend to your parents.....but The Minister?”

“We do have something in common, the right side of the war. And he’s done a lot for me, for us, without asking too much in return.”

“ Because he wants your support in the war, and against Dumbledore.”

“And he would have had it on both counts whether he did the training program for us or not. But he did it anyway, and he’s a nice guy.” Even Hermione could concede that much, though she didn’t just now.

“You don’t mind him using you for his own ends?”

Harry's reply was surprisingly gentle, a by-product of guilt perhaps.

"Hermione, you just don't get it do you? They're my ends too. Rufus and I want the same things, so it makes sense for us to work in concert."

"If you say so, of course you know him better than I do. I'm just trying to look out for you Harry, like I used to."

"And I'm very glad that you are." They shared a smile, and rejoined the others.

They did some touristy things in Notting Hill, and more than one person walked up to Warrick and asked for his autograph, apparently there were at least two England-based French football players that he resembled, most of the French World Cup team happened to be of African descent. The first two times all it took was his accent to dissuade them, but after that he warmed to the task and would happily sign whatever they wanted. The ones he signed for all had one theme as they left:

"You're so much bigger in person." Warrick was 6'4" 225 pounds.

To which Warrick would reply in his best fake-French accent:

"Yes I know, it is the television you see, it makes us look smaller."

The gang members with him all somehow managed to keep a straight face, and Jonas got some autograph requests too, people thinking that he was athletic looking enough to be a teammate. Scrawny looking Harry just stood there dying of laughter on the inside, there were advantages to hanging out in the muggle world rather than the magical one.

Around 5:00 pm they got back to the shop, and found that the big crowds had petered out. Harry had a few quiet words with Fred and George, and then beckoned to Ron.

“Come with us for a second Ron, these two can hold down the fort for a bit.” The shop closed at 6:00 pm, though there would be another slight surge before then.

Ron obediently followed along, thinking that they would be talking about plans for the evening. Well they would, but first Harry laid out the trunk system for him, pretty much using his Hermione speech without too many changes. Ron, surrounded by nine other people, asked only a couple of questions before he got to the one that Hermione had somehow missed.

“Can I try it?”

For the second time this afternoon, Hermione had the guilty pleasure of watching Harry go speechless, but her boyfriend’s reaction puzzled her. True, Ron had not said a cross word about Harry since the ‘Who the hell are you to call me paranoid!?’ talk back on the first day at The Hollow, but she was still expecting some kind of pouting or angry questions.

“Sure you can, that’s how we’ll get home tonight. Saves a lot of hassle with portkeys I don’t mind telling you.”

“Cool, that was a pretty swift idea Harry, getting those trunks.”

“Peter Tyson earned his fee, that’s for sure.” And earned himself a lot of new business too, as he was the official solicitor for WWW, and Bill had made sure that Gringotts threw some work his way. Tyson’s practice was booming, and he had already bought the finest Christmas card he could find to send to Neville’s grandmother, for the referral.

“Yes he did. Am I supposed to get mad now? Shall I shout some things about betrayal and stuff? I mean I don’t want to ruin the image.”

The room all started giggling, even Hermione as she went over and hugged him. Harry just patted him on the back, not in a condescending way of course.

“Feel free, I’m sure we wouldn’t all mind the entertainment. But I’m glad you understand, the last thing I wanted here was an argument.”

“Me too Harry, now I’d better get back to work, another 45 minutes to go.” Ron left, neither slowly nor in a hurry. Once he was safely gone, Harry breathed a sigh of relief and ran his hands through his hair. Hermione just chuckled a little bit.

“You had built this day up into a lot more hadn’t you?”

“I’m not afraid to admit that, yeah. Now everyone knows who is meant to know, or words to that effect. And I don’t mind telling you that it’s a load off my mind.” Very graceful wording, though not really, but everyone could empathize with him.

“No one else to join the circle?”

“Not unless someone breaks up with someone, or some of the parents get talkative when they shouldn’t.” They wouldn’t, all five American parental units, Mrs. Steele still did not know, were waiting for the other shoe to drop before going to Murray and putting a stop to it. To their relief, the shoe had not yet begun its descent. Molly and Arthur just liked the idea of having Harry be able to come back at a moment’s notice, and would only talk about it when around their adult children.

“I should have asked this with him in the room, but is he really okay with you coming on the American university tour?”

“He is, and I’m sure you’ve heard this before, but he wants to come on the Hawaii part of it.”

“That’s 43 people coming with us, I’m just going to rent two hotel rooms, bring a trunk, and we’ll all sleep at The Hollow.” Indeed he had thought about just that, bringing the spare trunk that usually resided in Sophie and Reiko’s room. The 43 thing was only a slight exaggeration. Hermione had one small point:

“You know those places are usually booked for this time of year Harry.”

“That’s why I reserved two rooms back in March, right after I was emotionally blackmailed into taking the SAT’s.” It had been during a Flackter trip, and Warrick now had a sudden moment of realization:

“So that’s what you were doing on that payphone!” Harry had only told Sophie, who grinned large at the blackmail comment. The others smiled at his thoroughness, Harry was indeed in charge of out of town trips, and rightly so.

“I was planning ahead Warrick, and I got the last two rooms for those dates as it was.” They were to spend two days in Hawaii, with a pair of days in Southern California right after that for San Diego State and UCLA. Then they would be visiting Tampa, Florida, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Charlottesville, Virginia in turn after that.

“Aren’t you the clever one, what’s for dinner man, I’m hungry.”

“I had the twins call ahead a few days ago to Wilton’s, Travis and his wife are going to meet us there, along with Fleur and Bill.” Wilton’s was the place that they had gone to for their big dinner the day after the wedding. It was closed on the weekends except for special parties, of which this was one.

The gang wandered around the shop for awhile, looking at the new products, and by closing time they were raring to get to the restaurant. They took the Underground to get there, and on the walk over to the restaurant, Ron and Harry had their ‘Quiddtich’ chat.

“Ron, I have to tell you something.”

“The trunk wasn’t all of it?” He wondered what the heck could be up now.

“Well this is just me and you for the most part. I’ve decided to play Quiddtich in America.” He had made his final decision recently,

committing to the grand university plan and not wanting the hassle and scrutiny of pretending to portkey across the Atlantic every day.

“You’re that comfortable over there?”

“I am, and something Janet Evans said hit me: I could help build something. My ‘celebrity’, if you want to call it that, can help expand the league, bring better players over.”

“Would they allow that? An American league to become more foreign?”

“She seemed to think that they would, yeah. That was one of her major selling points.”

“Where there do you want to play?” Ron had done a little research on the subject, and was now pretty familiar with the AQA.

“I don’t much care really, all four of them have advantages and disadvantages. But here’s my question, do you want to play over there too?”

“As part of a package deal?” Ron had actually thought a bit about this.

“Yeah, if you want. Evans said that I could probably get you and Warrick in with me, one of you would be a second round pick and the other sign as a free agent.” Ron hesitated for second, and Harry tried to anticipate his objection:

“Look mate, I am only bringing this up because I think you’re good enough. I wouldn’t say a word if you weren’t. This is only to keep the gang together, and it might be nice for you and Hermione to live in the same place without portkey issues.”

“I don’t know, I mean I’ve thought about playing over there, but.....”

“But you think you’re good enough for the league here.”

“Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. I don’t know mate, that’s a tough choice you’re giving me. A sure thing in a lesser league, or a iffy thing in the best league.”

“You have until after your next game to find out, since the BQL doesn’t make you declare until March 31. I know it means less money for you too, and you don’t have my vault to fall back on, but quality of life is a factor too.” If he was Ron, Harry knew he would probably pick Britain and a full court press to get Hermione to attend Oxford or Cambridge. Of course Ron was likely to have very little say in the overall decision-making process, but he might put his foot down over where he was going to work. Ron had thought of one other problem though:

“The one thing you might think of though, is that it would probably cost you any shot at the English National Quidditch Team. I bet they would resent it if you stayed over there to play.”

“I have no doubt, but if I’m dying to play internationally, I’ll just play for Wales. I’ve already gotten a letter from the manager there saying that he couldn’t care less where I play professionally, as long as I suit up for Wales. I know I’ll never win a World Cup playing for Wales, but it’s a nice fallback.” The Welsh team drew mostly from Hogwarts and Americans and Canadians of Welsh extraction. It’s team was considered to be a little better than Scotland, but nothing close to England, whose player pool was so much larger. Harry would make a big difference though.

Ron now brought the conversation back to the AQA.

“You could stock a team with just us you know, if they would let you.”

“Don’t think I haven’t thought about that, and I’m half tempted to see if Evans would go for it. Can you imagine a team with you as Keeper, a twin and Warrick at Beater, Angelina, Reiko and the other twin at Chaser, and me at Seeker? Or Ginny later on if Reiko doesn’t want to

play. And it would still all be within the family. I would just bribe Charlie out of Romania to be our coach, with Travis' wife assisting and being a backup Chaser as well, or starter, who knows. All it would take is getting Angelina free of her Wasp's contract." Star Quidditch players generally signed for three years at a time, and Angelina was halfway through her second season of her rookie contract. Ron was beginning to take to this idea, and they occupied the rest of the walk with it. The four older people were waiting for them at Wilton's.

A long, rambling dinner with terrific food was had by all, as Harry slipped the servers a little extra and told them not to expect to be home early. He ran his 'Weasley family and friends' Quidditch team idea by Rebecca Biller, and she had a lot of fun dissecting it with him. She was in the last year of her contract with Holyhead, and was thinking about flipping a coin on whether to retire or not, with retirement meaning another child in the near future. She ruled out the playing part of Harry's scheme, but said that she would think about the assistant coaching gig if it was offered.

Now Harry was really interested, he would take the twins aside later on in the break and bend their ear about it. They would be the hardest to convince, and would probably even start laughing at him. And they would be right to do so. As they would tell him that very evening back at The Hollow when he broached the subject:

"Look Junior, I'm not saying that it sucks as an idea in theory, but do you really want those Americans thinking you're so stuck up that you won't play with anyone but your friends and family?" Harry hadn't really thought of it like that.

"Fred's right bro, I think it would work as a charity exhibition game or something, maybe the lot of us against the Hogwarts all-stars or something like that. But not on a long-term basis."

"That's a good idea, I'll bring it up the next time I see Remus. Thanks for marking my card though, I should have thought of all that."

“That’s what we’re here for, we like being the rational ones on occasion.”

“We’ll help sell the exhibition idea to Remus too, it does have some possibilities.”

Back at the dinner, Harry also buttonholed Travis about Voldemort type things.

“How much did you get out of my buddies Crabbe and Goyle?”

“Not much, but it was better than them being loose on the street. Thanks for the collar by the way, some nifty work.” He had already informed Harry, through the twins, that Crabbe and Goyle were just doing recon work for their boss, nothing heinous intended. It made Harry wonder quite a bit why Voldemort was keeping such tabs on him, but there was no way to know for sure unless someone higher on the food chain was captured, and those people were less and less likely to be allowed out of Azkaban in the near future.

“Anything I can do to help. They’re at the new Azkaban?”

“Yes, but we don’t call it that. Rufus hasn’t come up with a name for it yet, right now it’s ‘The Detention Area’.”

“A bit boring, yeah.”

“Well we’re not out there running a public relations campaign or anything, at least not with that.”

“How bad did the public react to the prison takeover?” Harry still didn’t read The Daily Prophet.

“I think most of them were surprised that it took so long for him to do it. They still have a healthy respect for his mayhem ability. We got a few Howlers about incompetence, but nothing on the level that you would bring if you were pissed at us.” They both smiled, Harry’s Howler revenges were now legendary within Auror Command.

“Are they all under Fidelius yet?”

“Probably a quarter are so far, including everyone at this table, since the twins and The Hollow already were. It’s slow going, but we’re getting there.”

“How is the Dumbledore correspondence going with Voldemort?”

“Badly, though he doesn’t seem to have figured out that we’re running the show on it now. His Azkaban success, though he killed not a single Auror, seems to have emboldened him. His terms are worse than before, and even Dumbledore is calling for us to give it up.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Because it gives our evil friend something to think about, perhaps it gives him some pause at times. And also because it amuses The Minister to make Dumbledore keep doing it.”

Another shared smile, though it was of mutual dislike toward Dumbledore, not hatred. Harry could honestly say that he no longer hated the old man, if he in fact ever really did. Enough time had passed, and Dumbledore had made no attempt to speak with him at the November and December League meetings, which certainly helped.

The meal lasted four hours, and Bill got drunk for the first time in his siblings’ sight, the wine was a little too good and he was in a mood. It was happy drunk though, as Bill was one big smile on the walk home.

Yes, it was a very, very, very bad idea to Apparate while one is inebriated. Even in tandem it could cause a host of problems.

Fleur eventually hailed a taxi, as they lived in a muggle part of town not too far from the Grangers. The rest of them took the Underground back to WWW, where Ron got his first taste of the trunk floo.

Not that it was any different from the regular floo really, and he had to be talked out of wanting to floo to the Harry/Warrick dorm room, just to see. The Pink was still on there, and who knows what house elves or other staff might be wandering around. Instead he was put in charge of the DVD player for the night, since he had been beyond reasonable, for Ron anyway, about the whole day's business. Of course he picked all science fiction movies, and was outraged to find out that there were no plans for Star Wars to be put out on DVD anytime soon, though he was mollified by the fact that a Star Wars prequel was currently in post-production. One of Reiko's birthday presents had been a subscription to Entertainment Weekly, and in a fit of generosity she promised to Dobby the magazine over to Ron when she was done with it.

The next day Ginny came by, she was only doing limited duty at the shop this Winter because of her school load, again taking her presents in cold cash. She trunk flooed over from WWW in mid-afternoon, and the first thing she did was to give Harry as tight a platonic hug as existed in human history. Then she hugged Sophie almost as hard before she turned to Harry.

"Thank you Harry, thank you for what you did for me with Dean. I know I sent thanks in a letter, but that doesn't quite do it."

"Well I would say it was my pleasure Ginny, but I wish I never would have had to do it at all." Though he had started a trend, as Great Lakes women who were dumped by their boyfriends for less than honorable reasons had taken to buying Harry Potter's DIY Howlers by the barrel. Let's just say that there was a lot of jam on boys' clothing as of late. If anyone but Harry had started said trend there might have been repercussions, but no one wanted the gang's pranking attention focused on them.

"You've always looked out for me Harry, you've always been the best big brother I could have asked for." None of her blood-based brothers were in hearing distance fortunately, the twins and their ladies being at Isla de Marauder, as they usually were on Sundays.

“Tell me something though, did I hurt your chances over there now, by my somewhat over the top revenge? I mean is that why you targeted Jonas as your rebound guy?” Jonas was not in earshot either, he was educating Ron on Harry’s CD collection. Still, Ginny lowered her voice when she responded.

“He’s not my rebound guy Harry, I genuinely have him in mind as a match. We talked a lot at night while he was here, the two of us and Drew, so it’s not like I barely know him.” Both Harry and Sophie were ruining Sophie’s directive about no Listening Charms in the rooms now, but spilled milk and all that.

“Do your parents know about this?”

“I mentioned something about it in a letter. Either Mum thought I was kidding or she didn’t have anything to say about it, because she hasn’t mentioned it since.”

Harry knew that any fallout would be directed at him, because of his roommate arrangements during July, but part of him relished another potential argument with Molly. He felt it would be good for her to verbally duel with someone who wouldn’t so easily give in to her.

“Who did you go to the dance with?”

“I went by myself this year, though one of my fellow WWW employees asked me more than once.”

“A young man named Colin?”

“Yes, though he wasn’t a pest about it. He’s liked me for years, but I just don’t think of him in that way.” If Ginny saw the hilarious irony in that statement, given whom she was talking to at the moment, she did not let on. Harry did some Occulmency exercises to keep facial control as he responded.

“I hope you let the poor lad down easy.”

“I made sure that the twins did random checks of his WWW work, if that’s what you’re asking.”

It was, though Harry thought that a Ginny/Colin match would be very entertaining.

“Yes it was, thank you.”

“What do you have in mind for Dean? That was only part one of his hazing wasn’t it?”

“For the time being I’m going to relive my Dan Wetzel experience.”

“The guy who punched you in the Quidditch game?” She had seen the pensieve memory of it during the July experience, and Harry was very impressed that she remembered the name.

“The very one. I had such a fun time pretending to get vengeance on him that I think I’ll repeat the gesture. Dean’s going to spend the entire holiday wondering, it’s going to take the shine off it somewhat I think.”

“So you won’t actually harm him then?” She sounded more than a little disappointed.

Harry’s reply was surprising:

“No Ginny, this psychological warfare combined with the Howlers is enough. The punishment should fit the crime, and you’re better off now than you were. I’m proud of you for not giving in to his physical demands, if you weren’t comfortable with them. But he’s suffered enough Ginny, and as long as he doesn’t try anything else, we’re going to leave him alone.”

“We meaning?”

“The Great Lakes students and two of it’s British based alumni.” The twins, who were fully on board with this plan surprisingly enough.

Ginny took a long moment to think about that, but eventually nodded her head in apparent agreement.

“Okay, I can go along with that. The Howler thing was genius though, did they show it to you?”

“Hermione did last night, it was beautiful. The way he cringed.”

“It was a work of art, I hope you thanked your female schoolmates for me.”

“They got free Talking Tattoos, they don’t need any more thanks.”

“Then I’m glad I have a rich older brother, who’s willing to open his wallet to get payback for me.”

“You don’t ever have to worry about that Ginny. The next guy who works you over like that will get it a lot harder, trust me.”

Ginny said little about Jonas to Harry or the twins, but everyone noticed that at meal times over the next few days, they always sat next to each other, though they never disappeared anywhere. At least not so far as anyone could tell.

The following three days were a mass of Christmas shopping, snowball fights, and a massive game of Quidditch at The Burrow in the middle of a raging snowstorm. But the highlight for many was a Christmas Eve group visit to the nearest multiplex for Titanic. All the E-gang, every available Weasley, and the Biller adults as well sat for over three hours of the best film every female in attendance had ever seen. Even most of the guys proclaimed that they loved it, if only because of Kate Winslet. Only Neville and Charlie were holdouts, saying at most that it was ‘okay’. The women going on the American university tour informed the guys that there would be more Titanic screenings in their immediate future, and no one seemed to complain.

Though because the multiplex was running showings of Titanic 24 hours a day, Luna and Sophie had to be talked out of going right back

inside when they saw this. Neville had a resigned 'I'm going to be going to at least five more showings of this before the Christmas Break is over' look on his face, while Charlie was opening bragging that for once in his life he was happy not to have a girlfriend who would do that to him. They commiserated on the walk back, as everyone was to stay at The Burrow or The Hollow. Right before they flooded back home, the twins took Harry aside.

"Big doings tomorrow, very big doings."

"Are we talking about what I think we're talking about?"

"I'm sure we are Junior. Things were popped a few weeks ago, and there were positive responses to the poppings, if you get my meaning."

"I sure I hope I do. What can I do to help?"

"Just be up there with us, where you belong. Oh, and hang on to this for me." George slipped him a box with Alicia's wedding ring in it.

Harry couldn't help but smile as he pocketed the box, now he knew whose best man he was to be. Speaking of which:

"You know that when the time comes for me, it's both of you, right?"

"Kind of hard to split us up on anything really. Besides, we wouldn't have it any other way."

Meanwhile, in Death Eater-land, Frederick Nott found his new Potions Master.....or would that be Potions Mistress? Her name was Carla von Rock, a Durmstrang grad of indeterminate age who was based in Munich, Germany. She was, like Michael Parrish before her, a mercenary who mainly signed on for the money and access to the kind of potions buying power that Voldemort and his minions possessed. She was given the same salary stipend as her predecessor, and took a week to move into Azkaban, there would be no alternate brewing sites this time around. She seemed a pleasant enough person, considering the company she was now keeping.

Unfortunately for her, she was also under watch by the German magical government, and thus Rufus knew within hours that the bad man had someone new on the Potions front.

Voldemort would tell himself that he would not make the same mistake of 'trusting' von Rock as he had Parrish. Parrish's capture, which really couldn't be laid at the Potions Master's doorstep, had weakened the organization by a decent amount, and somewhat offset the gains from the Azkaban victory. Still, if he needed to confide in anyone, it would be the still under house arrest Peter Pettigrew. Pettigrew was busy planning future attacks, and was busy filling in the fine-print for the next large scale assault. Large scale attacks had not been their forte of late, Azkaban hardly qualifying, but the rat was trying to come up with a way to change all of that. The March election was coming soon, and Pettigrew wanted Voldemort and his crew to be in a position to influence it.

Thursday, December 25, 1997

Christmas Day

The Burrow

10:00 am GMT

At least the gang didn't have to get up early this year, as they readied themselves for their most ambitious holiday tour yet. There were five stops this day: The Burrow, The Forresters in Indiana, The Fords in Ohio, The Bayers in Colorado, and Tecumseh as the ender, as always. Even Harry and Jonas were quailing at the amount of food that was going to be forced on them over five stops, and all of them agreed that it was convenient that Jonas didn't like his relatives and wouldn't be expected. Oh it wasn't like a Drew situation, his mother's family just wasn't an affectionate bunch in total, and Jonas pretended to pay lip service to the family name so that he would get that part of his inheritance. They either did not realize this or did not care, which suited The Quod God just fine. The Longbottom celebration was typically family only, with spouses and sweethearts considered family as well, so that was not a stop on the tour, though Neville and Luna would put in an appearance at The Burrow.

Yes, it was a very complicated plan, but Harry thrived on these kinds of things lately, and liked that they were doing last year two stops better. Doing anything at The Hollow hadn't even been contemplated, though they would have Easter there perhaps.

Unlike The Burrow last year, there was no surprise appearance by Harry and five strangers showing up unannounced, so presents were done first this time, with food coming directly after. This exposed one flaw in the gang's whistle stop tour:

When to open their own presents?

The year before it had been an easy decision, because they weren't sure if they were even going to be welcome at The Burrow. Harry really should have known better, but he knew there would be hostility in the room and wanted to be prepared. This year it would be different, only good things and people. The gang had had a debate about this the night before the dance, the same night they wound up reducing the number of universities on the list from ten to six. The upshot:

The Fords were out as a present giving stop, considering that it would be awkward enough that six of them had never met any of the Fords at all. Marie's parents had made a point of assuring them, via letter, that they would be welcome, but it was still too new a thing there.

The Baylors were out for much the same reason, awkwardness. Plus there was the tension with Drew's sisters.

Tecumseh was out because they figured that they would just be too exhausted to bother by then. They were already planning to just crash there instead of flooing back to Wales for their last day in Britain. A big day to be sure, with Harry lunching with McCrae and Ginny's first 'date' with Jonas.

So it was down to The Burrow or Indiana, and tradition won out in the end, so intra-gang presents would be given in Indiana. At least that was the plan.

They did the game show thing as with the year before, and Harry and the twins announced another bonus and raise for Dobby and Winky. The bonus was \$400 this time, with a raise in their monthly stipend to 100 galleons, and since all of their living expenses were paid for in addition, the entire salary was profit for them. Both of the elves just smiled happily and told anyone that would listen that they had the best bosses in the entire world. Harry, Fred, and George of course denied that they were, but they were secretly very pleased at the compliments.

Ron and Hermione had been conspicuous by their absence during the Dobby and Winky show, and had even been gone for a few minutes before that. They reappeared and Arthur, with a twinkle in his eye, called on Ron to be next, he knew what had been going on. Ron looked so calm that the twins would later speculate that he was a little loaded, but he sounded very proud:

“This isn’t a present or anything, but Hermione and I are now engaged to be married.” Simple and to the point.

This was nothing remotely like a surprise to anyone in the room, so there were no gasps, or ‘but you’re so young’ comments. Just a long, loud round of applause from everyone there. Hermione showed off the ring, a nice one bought at a muggle jewelry store in London, her huge smile not leaving her face for quite some time. Bill had paid for the ring, saying that Ron could either pay him back when he was a big-time Quidditch tycoon, or just not expect any birthday or Christmas presents for the next decade, his choice. Ron had also been the one to pick it out, with Fleur’s help, though Hermione had been aware of the plan. And he did have good taste, or so the other females were thinking to themselves, Fleur giving Ron all the credit for the final choice.

The game show stopped for a few minutes so that everyone could hug Hermione and shake Ron’s hand, though Molly almost squeezed him to death. She also glanced at Harry, who knew just what she meant. He pointed to his wedding band finger and simply mouthed to her:

“Soon.”

She nodded happily and went over to hug Hermione. Charlie managed to put Ron on the spot again with his next, and obvious, question:

“So when are the nuptials?” Ron kind of hesitated, but when Hermione didn’t jump in, he plunged forward with what he wanted:

“I was thinking one year after Bill and Fleur got married, here at The Burrow of course. It can’t be the same date obviously, at least not if it’s a Saturday. But I would like to honor my best man and his wife, if they’ll let me.”

A bit of a shocker there, with the choice of best man. But not really, if one thinks about it. Bill had loaned/given him the money for the ring, and Ron had always worshipped his big brother, even if he really not been around Bill that much growing up, as Bill had been in his second year at Hogwarts when Ron was born. Plus, it had been well over a year since Harry and Ron had really been best mates, and the cracks had begun to show well before then. More than one person looked at Harry for a reaction, but The Boy Who Lived was still one big smile as he nodded in agreement with the plan. Not that his agreement was necessary. For his own part, Bill looked at Hermione.

“What does the bride-to-be think of that idea?”

Hermione was still in the flush of ‘my God I’m engaged!’ and was agreeable to pretty much anything at present. This was a new side to her, but the twins thought that at the very least it humanized her in a way that they had rarely seen before.

“It sounds wonderful, my parents are going to be so thrilled.” The Granger parents weren’t here today, though Ron and Hermione would be doing their own mini-tour and go spend time with them in the evening. Mother and Father Granger would wholeheartedly agree to the plan, and so would Hermione once she sobered up, figuratively of course.

“Well then it’s unanimous. I would be very proud to stand next to you Ron.” He had been about to say ‘my baby brother’, but Bill really did consider Harry to be a part of the family, and the youngest Weasley male. Not knowing about this, Ron came up to Bill and gave him another hug.

“Thanks Bill, for everything.”

“You’re welcome little brother. You’ve become a fine man and everyone here knows it.”

“That means a lot coming from you, I won’t let you down.”

Bill was three years away from becoming a father, but in later life he would tell people that this was the first moment that he had felt that ‘fatherly’ feeling. It touched him, and reminded him that while Charlie was his best friend, and the WWW three were the most fun, in a lot of ways Ron was his favorite brother. Nothing but chess came easily to Ron, and it was a pleasure for Bill to watch him bring himself up by the bootstraps, so to speak.

The game show was soon back on as more presents were handed out. While the twins were presenting Ginny with a nice leather coat as her present, Harry sidled up to Hermione, having already hugged her once.

“Just out of curiosity, you’re not planning to use that plane ticket promise from last year as your honeymoon transport are you?”

“We haven’t really thought about the honeymoon. Why?”

“I was going to offer the island. Not part of the wedding present I would get you of course, but it’s there for you if you want it.”

“Thank you, I’ll talk to Ron about it and let you know.” Ron seemed like less of a beach person than Hermione, indeed Ron had never actually seen an ocean before. But the twins had been the same way, and they were at Isla de Marauder at least one day a week now that they had the run of it for the last year.

“Anything I can do to help.”

“Are you upset that you’re not to be best man?” There had not really been an argument about that between Ron and Hermione.....per se. But it would be proper to refer to it as a lively discussion.

“Not at all Hermione, I would be a hypocrite if I was.” This entire conversation was being done very quietly, as was getting to be Harry’s wont when talking with one Weasley about another. And Hermione was even now more than ever, a Weasley. Though she was still closer in personality to Percy than any of the others.

She knew what that meant, Harry’s hypocrite comment, and declined to enter another twin bashing extravaganza.

“Both of them I take it?”

“Yes, though I would like Ron to stand up with me, as I’m sure Sophie will want you up there as well.” And she would, if only to balance so many guys on Harry’s side. He chose not to say this of course, and for all the delight she took in Harry’s deconstructing of the Ron/Hermione relationship, Sophie really did like Hermione.

“That would be great. I think it will just be Ron and Bill and me and Ginny, I don’t really have a lot of female friends now that I look back on it.” Parvati and Lavender would be invited, but at Hogwarts Hermione only considered Luna and Ginny to be true friends, and she had pretty much ruled out inviting any of her muggle friends from the neighborhood, they just would not understand about any of this. Even Ginny was more or less by default as maid of honor.

Harry gave her one more squeeze on the shoulder, and then returned to the game show in time to see Molly and Arthur open his present of a muggle snooker table. Arthur dang near fainted dead away with delight, while even Molly looked interested.

“I figured it would give you two something to do after dinner, with no kids around to cause trouble.”

“Thank you Harry dear, we’ll put it near the aquarium, the Harry corner of the house.” The aquarium was near the window on the north side of the living room, and it had five different kinds of fish in it. Molly loved it being there, right next to her favorite chair, she found the whole thing very relaxing. Arthur had followed up on his plan for the two of them to take nightly walks together after dinner, and both of them were looking more fit than Harry had ever seen them.

Harry felt a tug on his new Weasley sweater, one with small WWW lettering on it, matching Fred’s and George’s. He turned around and saw the very men themselves, they were motioning for him to come with them. He followed them into the kitchen, where Bill and Charlie were waiting for them.

“What’s going on.”

“Our big surprise. Now put this on and get ready for the fireworks.”

“Not literally fireworks really, but the show is about to start. Big brothers, if you’ll go get the others for us.”

Bill and Charlie went outside and walked to the same area where they had met the gang last year, and this time as well they were waiting for some arrivals. But more than six this time.

Harry looked at the garment bag he was handed.

“I have dress robes you know.”

“No kidding, that’s not a robe. Look.”

Harry did as ordered, and it was a tuxedo. Savile Row made, it included the works, including shoes.

“How did you know what size everything was to get?” The twins both looked at him like he was the worst kind of simpleton.

“Do we not have access to your living quarters? Besides, Winky got all the measurements for us. Now quickly put that on while we do the same, Lee is coming with the others.”

“How many people are we expecting?”

“More than a couple, now move it Junior before we get the lovely Sophie in here to do it for you.”

“Go ahead, it’s very sexy to have someone you love dress you.” Nonetheless he started stripping, praying that no one would come into the kitchen. Well other than Sophie anyway. Heh heh.

“Please don’t make us think about you and sordidness Harry, you’re our chaste little brother, or you’re supposed to be.” Harry rolled his eyes but chose not to argue further. Fred and George had either been practicing, or were just really good at this kind of thing, because in less than two minutes they were done with everything but tying their shoelaces.

“I admit to nothing.”

“Just hurry up, they should be here any minute.”

It was a minute and a half actually, as Bill and Charlie returned with quite a few people:

Alicia Spinnet and her mother and stepfather, father and stepmother, and a half-sibling from each of the two newer unions. Also with her was Katie Bell, who would stand up with her, and Katie’s ‘friend’ and Puddlemere United teammate Oliver Wood.

Angelina Johnson with her parents and her little sister Barbara, a Fourth Year Gryffindor, who would stand up with her.

Also coming was Lee of course, already clad in his tuxedo, as well as special guest Rufus Scrimgeour. He had enjoyed his last Weasley wedding so much that he readily agreed to marry the twins off. Remus and Tonks were in the party as well, holding hands and

looking very happy together, as Tonks was now a cohabitant of the Headmaster's quarters at Hogwarts. The last guests were the Weird Sisters, who were arguably the Brit adults who bought the most WWW products. There was even talk of a promotional deal, as the band was about to embark on a world tour. They would be playing the wedding march and then turn into regular party guests afterward, having become good friends with the twins and their ladies..

They all walked, somewhat silently into the Weasley kitchen, filling it, as Fred shoved Harry out into the living room to interrupt the game show. He wasn't sure what to say, and decided to make it as surreal as possible. Before everyone could take in the fact that Harry was wearing a tux, he shouted for attention.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and Warrick, I have the proud privilege of informing you that you are the guests at the wedding event of the Christmas season. Yes, Fred and George Weasley are settling down and becoming married men. And yes, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet have finally taken leave of what is left of their senses and consented to be joined in holy matrimony with the two most brilliant troublemakers in the collective histories of Hogwarts and Great Lakes! I give you the happy couples!"

That was quite a speech, and immediately thereafter Warrick could be heard saying to Reiko:

"I knew we shouldn't have let him watch those Mike Tyson tapes." He had liked the reference to himself too. Reiko just shook her head.

"You were right, I was wrong, I thought he could handle them. Don King would be proud of our boy."

But the main focus was on the twins and their brides-to-be, as they walked into the living room. Angelina and Alicia were both wearing traditional muggle wedding gowns, again gotten in muggle London. Fred and George were the centers of attention though, at least at first. Molly was the first to find her voice.

“What on earth are you boys wearing?” She had never seen a tux in person, and only a few times in photographs. Fred did a pirouette and show off his finery, though thankfully there was no top hat and tails.

“This is what our muggle friends, not that we have any, wear when they get married. Bill, Ron, and Charlie will all have worn robes, so we want to be different. Junior’s wedding will be half muggle so we know he’s going to following our good example.”

“Right, what he said.” He knew Fred was right, and looked over at Sophie who gave him a wolf whistle with two thumbs up to boot. She liked how he looked in that tux.

“And don’t our lovely brides-to-be look gorgeous?”

They did, and only Hermione seemed to noticed that the combination of people in the room seemed to be a bit off.

“I thought that the grooms weren’t supposed to see the brides before the wedding?”

“Another flouting of tradition my dear future sister-in-law, besides, we’re going to do this right now, ten minutes isn’t going to kill anybody.”

Everyone else had come in from the kitchen and the living room was just about full to capacity. Arthur saw his boss and went over to shake hands.

“Thank you for coming Minister, and for marrying these hooligans off.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world Arthur, you’re very welcome. So where are doing this?”

Arthur had been apprised by his sons that something large would be going down today, but they gave him no details. In fact, the Weasley patriarch had been hoping that they were referring to Ron’s announcement, since he just didn’t see his twins as the marrying type,

especially since they were living with their girlfriends already. He looked around the room and factored in a couple of things.

“Angelina, Alicia, would a wedding outside be too cold for you?”

The women looked at each other for a second. There was no new snow out there, and it could be cleared off anyway. Angelina nodded her agreement.

“We can handle that, especially since the brides don’t go out until the last minute.” Very wise, and Arthur could appreciate that. He thought that on the whole, Angelina and Alicia were the ones who had stabilized the twins the most. Harry was their outlet for mayhem, the one who expanded their horizons and gave them opportunities. In short, the little brother they had always secretly wanted Ron to turn out to be. But the women were the ones who kept them somewhat grounded, and he liked and respected them both very much.

“Okay then, everyone get outside and get rid of some snow. Let’s go Weasleys and friends.” All the guests streamed outside, after getting some coats on for those who weren’t wearing them already, though the twins both grabbed Ron and Hermione before they could go. Harry and Arthur hung back too, and listened to Fred.

“Look you two, we don’t want you thinking that we’re doing this to take your spotlight, or moment, or whatever you want to call it. The four of us decided this weeks ago, that this is how we wanted to do it. I know that we haven’t been big on thinking about your feelings over the last couple of years, but this time we really weren’t trying to sabotage you or anything.”

Hermione had been thinking just that, though only half-heartedly. She knew that however ‘devil may care’ the twins appeared to be on the outside, there was no way they could run that business without being pretty organized, and this kind of thing would have taken some planning. She was mentally speculating on how to word this, when Ron beat her to the punch.

“We know guys, and we’re very happy for you, right Hermione?”

“Yes we are, you’ve both been with your ladies a long time, and you deserve nothing but happiness.” She sounded and looked totally sincere when she said this, though that was stopped by both twins pulling her into a joint hug.

“Just for saying that, and appearing to mean it, you don’t have to get either of us a wedding present Hermione, that was enough.”

“George is right, but that doesn’t let you off the hook Ron, though we’ll take some more free shop hours.” They let a flustered but smiling Hermione go.

Ron just smirked at his fiancée, a word that would take him some time to get used to, even though he had wanted to marry Hermione for the last five years plus now. He liked the present deal though, as he was a lot more thrifty than he used to be.

“Done, though let’s wait until after New Years. Now get going you two.” They all laughed and walked outside, where a path through the snow, double-wide, had been cleared by some Incendio from Bill, Charlie, and Angelina’s father Alonzo. The guests, all of whom had coats and Warming Charms on them, were standing room only, with Rufus at the end. Hermione walked out with Harry and Arthur.

“So how long have you known about this Harry?”

“About the weddings being today? Officially, for about 13 hours now, though I’ve suspected it for months.”

“And being best man?”

“That I’ve known about for a lot longer.”

“I’m glad, you and the twins seemed joined at the hip sometimes, but it’s a good thing.” Said with a totally straight face and no irony in her voice, so Harry was immediately suspicious.

“Uh huh.”

“No, really. I mean it this time.” And she did, and though Harry was a little wary, he let it go for the time being. He joined Lee at the end of the line, with Katie and Barbara on the other side. The Weird Sisters got their gear ready in record time, and started playing an instrumental song of theirs, entitled *Passing By*, a song that the twins particularly had a thing for. This was the cue for Fred and George to march down the aisle.

Fred went first, strolling down the path as only he could. He was grinning like crazy, but otherwise didn't say anything, or wave his arms about. The big thing he wanted to convey is that he was happy, and that did get across very well. Molly was already tearing up a bit, and Arthur looked as proud as anyone had ever seen him.

George followed, with his hands behind his back and a confident stride. He stopped by Molly in the front 'row' and kissed her hand, before taking his place next to his brother.

The Weird Sisters finished their song with a flourish, and then started up the traditional wedding march. Angelina had won/lost the coin flip and went down first, escorted by her father Alonzo. This was not really how she had always envisioned her wedding happening, but once she started dating Fred she knew that a lot of life's conventions would be going by the wayside. She was tall and assured, and was not the least bit nervous as she lightly held her wedding bouquet in her left hand, while her right hand was slightly squeezing her father's elbow.

For Alonzo Johnson, this was one of the proudest moments in his life so far. Alonzo, who was a copy editor at *The Daily Prophet*, liked Fred quite a bit, and since Fred and Angelina had been friends for years before dating, he had seen his son-in-law grow up and 'mature'. He was still nervous though, as fathers giving away their daughters often are. He hoped that his other daughter Barbara would wait awhile, if only so that he wouldn't have to do this again so soon, though he had once lamented to his wife that he wished there was a

Weasley son young enough for Barbara, since he found them all to be such fine men.

Alicia Spinnet was escorted down the aisle by her father Jacob, and her step-father Wilson Michener. Her parents had divorced when she was two, and so Alicia grew up in two households, splitting time between her mother's and father's places. Jacob and Wilson had long ago reached an understanding regarding their fatherly duties, and got along very well. Alicia walked between with a sheepish grin, as she saw her twin waiting for her at the end. She wouldn't admit this to anyone, but she could tell her Weasley twin from the other too, there was a slight difference in the voice that she had picked up on over the years, though the twins had never tried a switch-a-roo on their girlfriends. Or at least not after Angelina had threatened them during Sixth Year. This was not how Harry could tell them apart, though she too kept up the façade of trying to get the secret out of him.

Once everyone was in place, Rufus started the nitty gritty. This was only his third wedding of the year, Bill's and one other, so he felt free to make up his spiel as he went along. To stay in the spirit of things he thought.

"Friends, family, we are gathered here to celebrate the marriage of four people who truly belong together. It is a solemn occasion to be sure, I can already see the mothers starting to tear up, and I don't blame you. But how solemn an occasion can it be when it involves Fred and George Weasley?" Everyone was laughing now, a very fitting statement, and Rufus continued.

"Still he we are, as the second and third sons of Molly and Arthur Weasley are to marry, following eldest son Bill earlier this year. But it is too easy to focus on the twin redheaded terrors, as successful and courageous as they are. Alicia Spinnet was an honors graduate of Hogwarts and is currently in the second year of a promising career as a journalist. The product of two families, she has done all of her parents proud. Angelina Johnson is of course a famous Quidditch star, the leading scorer for the Wimbourne Wasps and the second leading scorer for the English National Team. Both of these fine young ladies have a lot to be proud of, they are a credit to our society

and to the parents who bore and raised them.” All six parents were beaming at the high praise from their Minister. Rufus noticed this and directed his best politician’s smile right back at them. There was an election coming up after all.

“Is there anyone present who objects to these marriages?” Since this was a select guest list, the answer was obviously no.

“Angelina Michelle Johnson, Alicia Renee Spinnet, do you take Frederick Prewett Weasley and George Prewett Weasley to have and to hold, to love and cherish, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as you all shall live?”

Angelina and Alicia, inseparable for the last eight plus years, briefly held hands as they answered:

“I do.”

“I do.”

“Frederick Prewett Weasley, George Prewett Weasley, do you take Angelina Michelle Johnson and Alicia Renee Spinnet, to have and to hold, to love and cherish, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as you all shall live?”

“You better believe it sir.”

“Abso-bloody-lutely Minister.”

Ah the twins.

“I believe it’s time for the rings Mr. Jordan, Mr. Potter.” Lee pulled out his box, extracted a ring, and handed it to Fred. Harry did likewise, handing his to George. The rings were from, ironically, the same London jewelry store that Ron and Fleur had gotten Hermione’s ring, and gotten less than two weeks apart no less. Fred and George had been salting away money for this for most of the year, and they really were spectacular, spared no expense.

The twins put the rings where they were supposed to go, and Rufus delivered the coup de grace.

“By the power vested in me as The Minister of Magic, I now pronounce you husbands and wives. The grooms may kiss the brides.”

Fred and Angelina tightly embraced and he laid a whopper of a kiss on her. Alicia just grabbed George by the head with both hands and planted one on him. Harry and Lee started the round of applause, a standing ovation.

Of course everyone was standing already.

Rufus shook hands with all four newlyweds, and they made the walk back down the ‘aisle’ and inside to the warmth, the brides being the only ones without coats. Soon everyone had filed in as well, with Christmas dinner turning into the wedding reception. Dobby and Winky had been busy setting things up in the kitchen, dining room, and living room, and there were just enough chairs for everyone to sit down, though they would be balancing plates and putting drink glasses. The food was going to be put in the kitchen, buffet style, and Molly was so overcome with emotion that she just let the two elves run things, especially after Dobby gently informed her that he was used to running a large household too and could handle things while she celebrated.

The last people outside were Rufus and Harry, whom The Minister had given the nod to. Remus also hung back after Rufus called to him.

“That was more normal than I would have thought Harry.”

“That’s the fun of it, they just made a few changes here and there. I’m sure the brides had a lot of input.” A lot indeed, hence the lack of a true circus.

“No doubt. I haven’t had a chance to talk to you the last couple of days Harry, but there has been a development.”

“With Voldemort? He’s not taking the holiday season off?” That thought brought a smile to the faces of all three men, but Rufus quickly got back to business.

“No, it has nothing to do with Voldemort. We have had some results from Remus’ Ventriloquist Sponge caper.”

Harry’s eyes got very wide for a moment, thinking that this could only mean one thing:

“So what’s McGonagall plotting behind your back Remus?”

“It’s not my back Harry, it’s The Minister’s. Dumbledore is going to stand against him in the election.”

To say that this hit Harry like a ton of bricks.....

“Wow, that’s pretty.....well, stupid.” The other men were smiling again as Remus nodded.

“That was my feeling too Harry, but I overheard McGonagall and Hagrid talking about it. She does do sweeps of the room, but the Sponge is passive enough that she doesn’t pick it up.” Remus, who was very rich as one might recall, had immediately ordered another 100 of the advanced Ventriloquist Sponges from WWW, as had Bones on behalf of the DMLE.

“How do you know that she hasn’t found it and she’s just messing with you?”

“Because of other things she said, let’s just say that she’s very harsh in her private critiques of her colleagues.”

Harry could all too easily believe that.

“And Hagrid was just going ‘yes’, ‘of course Professor McGonagall’.”

“Well Harry he has quite a use as a sounding board, but you got the gist of it pretty correctly. Remus of course can fire her whenever he wants without a peep from me, but it’s his decision as Headmaster.” Remus was nodding, and in fact had told Sinistra that she was one more McGonagall false move away from being promoted.

“What are you going to do Minister?”

“Nothing for the moment. Dumbledore has until January 15 to file the paperwork, and there’s nothing I can do to stop him, even if I wanted to.”

“You don’t mind him running?”

“I could do without the hassle, yes. But I think it would be good for the public to have a choice.” If only Hermione could have heard that, Harry thought ruefully, though he would tell her later.

“No pro-Darks running?”

“Not yet, though there still is three weeks to go, I wouldn’t be surprised if they throw up a symbolic choice.”

“Let me guess, you want me to leak this to McCrae tomorrow.” He was surprised by the offended look on Rufus’ face.

“I am a bit more subtle than that Harry, thank you very much. I wouldn’t use you as part of a propaganda ploy like that. Besides, I told him last night over dinner, he just hasn’t printed it yet.”

“How did he take it?”

“He was intrigued, let’s just put it that way.” The older men started walking slowly toward the house, with Harry having no choice but to follow them. The conversation was only a couple of minutes old, but both men felt that Harry would be missed very soon, if not already.

“What do you want me to say to him tomorrow about this?”

Rufus had thought long and hard about this very subject since Remus had shown him the evidence. There were pros and cons to every angle he could think of, so in the end he decided to simply trust his protégé to do what was necessary, without being nudged in a particular direction.

“Whatever you want to say Harry, I would just appreciate it if you tell me afterward what you two talk about, with that subject.”

“I was just going to bring a Sponge and have Dobby deliver it to you afterward.” No he wasn’t really, or at least hadn’t planned on it, this was a spur of the moment inspiration.

“That would work very well Harry, thank you. Now we’d better get inside before a posse comes out here looking for us.”

“One more thing, how secret is this?”

“Well don’t tell anyone that isn’t here, aside from Professor Murray and your people over in America. Speaking of which, is Drew’s mother going to run for President? Has a decision been made there?”

“I will probably find that out in about 10 hours or so sir, I’ll have Dobby come tell you if it’s a yes.”

“I would appreciate that, inside information is the best kind of information.”

The three of them hurried inside, but not before Harry could ask Remus:

“So is another wedding coming up soon Remus? Eh?”

“Please don’t start that Harry, I got it all last night from Andromeda Tonks.” Which did not answer the question, so Harry felt free to torment his friend a little more.

“All the more reason TO start it, if you ask me.”

“Don’t make me give you a detention.....oh right.”

“Aren’t you so funny? I’ll take that as a no, then.”

“What about you? You’ve been with Sophie as long as Ron and Hermione have been together.” Not quite, Harry was fond of pointing out, but he chose a different tack instead.

“Ron and Hermione knew each other for almost five years before they became a couple, whereas I fell in love with Sophie in not much more than five hours. Give me time. Say, Spring-time.”

A grin alighted Remus’ face, he was smiling a lot more these days, and lately was beginning to look as young as his years for the first time in quite some time.

“Fair enough.”

They walked inside to find that most people hadn’t even gotten their food yet, and only Sophie had really started to wonder where Harry was. She came up to him and handed him a Dr. Pepper.

“What was that all about.”

“Oh, just Dumbledore’s going to run for Minister, nothing big.”

Very little Harry said about Britain and its intrigues surprised Sophie any longer, and her reply was almost perfunctory.

“You’re not kidding, are you?”

“Would that I was. Where are the happy couples?”

“In the living room fending off questions about why this was so sudden.”

“It wasn’t sudden, it was a surprise, big difference.”

“I’m sure Molly will see it just like that.” They were both snickering as they went into the living room to see the brides.

In fact Molly was wondering just what the brides’ mothers had been wondering about when this had been sprung on them 90 minutes ago: Buns in the oven.

There weren’t, but Angelina and Alicia knew that it would take a few months time to convince anyone of that. They managed to convince Molly though, by a nice, shattering piece of logic. Alicia:

“Molly, we’ve promised you that there are no grandchildren on the way. Do you think we want to come over here in a few months time and tell you that we lied to you?”

That brought a slightly embarrassed smile to Molly’s face.

“Of course not dears, and even if you were it would be just fine. Angelina Weasley and Alicia Weasley, I do love the sound of that.”

“So do we Molly, trust us on that one.” Angelina would inform her club and national teams of the name-change via Dobby the next day, as her new married name was now her official name, unlike many female athletes and entertainers.

“You two are very good for those boys. Will you be staying at Godric’s Hollow then?” Angelina answered, as their parental units were very interested in the answer as well.

“That’s the plan right now, our landlord is a very generous bloke, not charging us rent and all and giving us use of his place.” Of course Angelina in particular made a great living, and Alicia started laughing at hearing her say that.

“She’s right, but that’s not why we stay there. It’s a lovely place, lots of room but also lots of privacy. And it allows us all to save up money

for our own places if and when Harry comes back to live there.” The Boy Who Lived himself heard that as he made his way to the brides.

“Hopefully that won’t make you move out even then, Sophie and I would just rattle around in there by ourselves. Congratulations to you both.” He hugged both brides and beamed at them.

“It’s been a long time since that first Quidditch practice hasn’t it?” When he had officially met the two of them.

“Not too long, since you’re still in school.”

“Hey, six years is a long, long time.” In more ways than one, they were all thinking. Leslie Upham, Alicia’s mother, had a pertinent question for the brides.

“Where are you going to be going on your honeymoon?” The answer was a bit of a shocker, as Alicia explained:

“We’re taking a week off each, and the first half is going to be a separate honeymoon for each couple. George and I are going to a private island that we have access to, while Fred and Angelina will be going to Paris to stay with Fleur’s family for a couple of days. Then we’re going to meet up and spend the rest of the time in Italy, where Bill and Fleur went. They gave us some places to go and see, so we’re going to take advantage of that.” The private island was Isla de Marauder, and the Paris thing let it slip that Bill and Fleur had known about this for far longer than 90 minutes. But no one brought that up. Now at least.

Meanwhile the twins were also assuring the three fathers that, while the two couples had been living together for the last six months, no one was about to be a grandfather. Fred and Angelina in particular were going to wait, citing Travis and Rebecca Biller’s example of waiting for the downside of the Quidditch career. The three dads seemed to believe all that, on the surface anyway, and made no argument. Of course Kiplinger’s was a huge help, it not only tasted like a chocolate shake, it prevented buns in the oven.

Everyone else was mingling, or quickly visiting, as was the case with Lee and Claudia, who had flooded over to the Jordan residence for a one hour visit. Claudia had met Russell and Keira Jordan the day before, right before the visit to Titanic, but the parents wanted another chance to get to know her better. The Lee/Claudia relationship was now as solid as any in the gang, and while there had not even been a hint of wedding talk, it was established that Lee would live in the college commune and take the trunk floo to work. And to think that Harry had once thought that Claudia hit for the other team. Well, a lot more people than Harry had thought that.

The game show was sort of back on, though in a very haphazard way. There were no really young children about, even Alicia's step-siblings were all at Hogwarts by now, so the urgency was not quite there.

Among the presents given:

Harry gave Hermione another homemade gift certificate, this time for a computer. It was good whether she did the American college thing or stayed in Britain, either way. Remus had already told them all that while the Great Lakes magic/electricity matrix was a great idea in theory, he had a hard enough job keeping the oars in the water without trying to introduce muggle things into his school. Once the war was over, he kept saying.

Ron, in addition to getting on one knee, had gotten Hermione new dress robes again, as his fiancée had shot up another inch. Hermione's parents were perfectly willing to buy them for her, but she took their money and spent it on a couple of expensive books that she wanted. It was widely believed amongst the gang that if Hermione took the university offer, one prime reason would be to have daily access to the Godric's Hollow and Black Libraries. When later asked about this, Hermione would just smile.

Ron and Ginny, in a moment of unity, had gotten Harry and Sophie a magical photo album filled with pictures from July. They had hired Winky, with the twins' permission, and she had captured a lot of the fun of the month. The highlight of the present was the captions under each photo, it seemed that the twins weren't the only ones in the family with funny bones.

Harry gave Ron and Ginny each a homemade gift certificate for a top of the line stereo, with multiple CD's as well. These were futures presents, like all of Hermione's, but the two Weasleys loved the idea anyway.

Lee's gift to Claudia was something for the bedroom, a piece of clothing, and a furiously blushing Claudia refused to show it to any of them. She was very pleased with it though, it was very girly and quite the opposite of the tank top and sweatpants that she usually wore to bed.

Molly and Arthur got the twins matching recliners, which they had found while nosing through a furniture store. The twins loved them, and immediately went out and bought two more for Angelina and Alicia, at least upon returning from their honeymoon. This added to the mix and match look of The Hollow, so much that was old and antique, and so much that was modern.

Dinner went on for what seemed like hours, but was really only two and half. It totally lacked the tension of the previous year, or the somberness of the year before. In a surprise move, Molly and Arthur told some Percy stories, something they had avoided at all family gatherings since his death almost 15 months previous. Ron was always uncomfortable with Percy stories of any kind, so he asked Harry to take a walk with him, up to his room for a minute.

"What's up Ron?"

"I just wanted to make sure that you were alright with Bill being my best man. I'm not apologizing mind you, but I don't want your feelings to be hurt either."

"I'm fine with it Ron, and it says a lot about you that you'd be concerned like that."

"Well I'm glad, and I do consider you to be part of the family. I know I was a wanker about that last year, but....."

“You’re a different person than that guy Ron, and what’s more everyone knows it.”

“I appreciate that Harry. Ginny asked me the other day if I had changed because Hermione threatened me if I didn’t, you know, about breaking up with me. That’s one thing I don’t like, that everyone assumes that Hermione runs me 24/7.”

Harry kept a very straight face upon hearing that, because he could readily count himself among the ‘everyone’ in question. Besides, Hermione had run his life too for almost five years, with little objection from Harry.

“She’s a take charge kind of woman Ron.” Which said very little, and he hoped that Ron would get off the subject. No such luck.

“I have my say, whatever they think. I don’t think she could marry a man that she could run roughshod over like they think.” Ron’s vocabulary was improving too, Harry noticed.

“Ron, you know that in the muggle world there is this thing called ‘community college’, it’s kind of like high school plus, and gets people ready for a four year school. I know you’re not ready for muggle university yet, and I barely am for that matter, but if you want to take classes at a community college, we can easily swing that. Then Michael can put the fix in and get you into whatever school we wind up picking.”

Ron’s quick answer was very telling.

“I’ll think about it Harry, but probably not, at least not if I can play Quidditch. Let me see what the scouts say after the March game against Hufflepuff and we can talk then. In fact, since you’ll be there with the League meeting and all that, come with me to talk with them. You don’t have to tell them that you’re playing in America next year.” In reality Harry wanted no part of any meetings with men and women whose Quidditch league he would be snubbing a few weeks later, but he was willing to do this for Ron, who really asked him for very little on the whole.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“There’s one other thing I wanted to talk about.”

“Let me guess, Ginny and Jonas.”

“Right in one. Are you sure about that? About them getting together? I mean she just got publicly dumped by Dean.....”

“I had nothing to do with it Ron, you gotta believe that. I mean I’m helping and all, but the initial idea, that spark, that was Ginny. Drew told me that they would idly flirt and all during the July time, but nothing really romantic happened. I guess she always had him in the back of her mind, at least since then. Besides, one date does not a relationship make. My personal example notwithstanding.” He could tell that Ron was not really satisfied with that answer, and his friend quickly proved him correct.

“You didn’t talk him up or anything to her?”

Harry was curious as to how this was any of Ron’s business, what he did or did not say to Ginny, but he was willing to put up with it for a tick longer. He knew that Ginny would have punched her brother by now.

“Not really, my letters to Ginny are more news and things like that than getting into personal feelings. Though I do tell her a lot about Sophie.”

“Just keep looking out for her like you do, if he tries anything.”

That’s where Harry was going to draw the line, but in a funny way he agreed with Ron on that slight point. If Jonas was getting as much action as he thought, why would he go for someone whose last boyfriend dumped her because she wouldn’t give him any at all? Was it the challenge of it all? That was hard to really believe, as Jonas had seen what his friend could do on the revenge side of things. Harry

had resisted asking Jonas this, and for his part Jonas was volunteering nothing on that score. All he ever asked about were Ginny's daily habits and any interesting quirks in her personality.....a lot of which Harry knew nothing about, Ginny only having really hung around him for his last year at Hogwarts. So he had taken to 'interviewing' Luna, via letters, and she was a fountain of information, which Harry dutifully passed on to Jonas.

"If he cheats on her, he answers to me, which is one very large reason why he's not going to cheat on her. I have the Map 2.5 at school and I can zero in on him and any of his companions on a second's notice. He knows all of this Ron. Besides, he's a great guy, and I know he'll do right by her."

"I really want to believe that, and I know that Ginny doesn't care what I think anyway. But I still care about her, and I want her to be happy."

"Have you tried telling Ginny that?"

"No he hasn't."

Speak of the devil, Ginny herself was in the doorway. Harry immediately adopted a big welcoming smile.

"Why Ginny, fancy seeing you here."

"Oh shut it Harry, they need you downstairs, you and Lee have to give the best man toasts." She was smiling though, at least about the shut it part.

"Oh great, I was hoping that the untraditional part of the festivities included getting rid of the toasts."

"No such luck, better get down there."

"Yes ma'am."

Harry gave a 'good luck' look to Ron, and hastened down the stairs. Ginny had just one thing to say to her brother.

"While I admire the sentiment, if you interfere with Jonas and I in the slightest, you'll wish you were never born."

"It's nice to have a sister who loves and respects me."

"I do love you Ron, and I respect you most of the time. Just remember that my life is my life."

"Yet you don't mind Harry interfering." Meaning the Howlers.

"I didn't ask him to do a thing to Dean, and he only acted after the fact. After Dean did that to me. He didn't threaten Dean ahead of time or try to interfere, in fact he did everything to help." She could see that Ron didn't appreciate the distinction, and to keep the peace here, she tried a different approach.

"Look Ron, I know that you mean well and I really do appreciate the fact that you care. But I'm a big girl now and I can handle things very well on my own. Just be supportive and encouraging, and we will get along just fine." To her everlasting wonderment, this tack appeared to work.

"Fair enough, and Jonas is a good guy, I know that much."

"Yes he is, and I really do think that this is the start of something. And if it isn't? Then no harm done either way, we'll only see each other at holidays and the like."

"Okay, I promise I won't interfere. But if he goes south on you the way Dean does, I'll be front and center to get revenge this time. Even you have to agree that Harry has a conflict of interest here."

Ginny had indeed thought about that, but couldn't conceive of Harry taking Jonas' side over hers in the facts were even remotely in her favor. She was incorrect of course, but it's not like she could flat out ask him. Or get a straight answer even if she did. Harry had only told

Jonas a straight answer so as to put the other man's mind at ease after the Howler business.

"It won't come to that Ron. Now let's get downstairs so we can hear the speeches." She surprised her brother by giving him a quick hug, and they hustled down the stairs, having only missed part of Lee's, very short, best man speech.

"And so history was made, and the Gryffindor Common Room was in chaos, much to our satisfaction. I have known these four for over eight years, and it's been my privilege be their friend and confidante. I know I couldn't have asked for better ones for my own self, and for a better extended circle than those of us here today. To Fred, Angelina, George, and Alicia Weasley!" He raised his glass of wine and everyone else did the same. The twins pretended to get all misty eyed, and the brides gave Lee a dual hug.

Now it was Harry's turn. Perversely, Harry had little trouble talking directly to Ministers and Presidents, and no trouble insulting the two most powerful Wizards in the country, Messrs. Riddle and Dumbledore.....but all of that gave him little comfort now, as he had to talk to his family.

"Well the Gryffindor Quidditch Team is back together again, for the first time in months. That's how I will always think of Angelina and Alicia, as my teammates and friends, as I was an 11 year old, wide eyed boy experiencing things and sights that would have driven any muggle kid insane, but those two, and their hubbies, were there for me. They were there with sage advice, and a kick in the pants when warranted. Angelina and Alicia, Fred and George, above all were examples. Examples of the kind of people that I wanted to grow up to be, examples for all of us younger than they are, and more than a few that are older." He paused for breath.

"Now we've all known that this day was inevitable, these marriages, but it's a joy to finally see them walk down the aisle. This is a year for Weasley weddings and announcements, with only Ginny, thankfully, and Charlie, unfortunately, not planning to go to the alter. It was also our first full year without Percy, and I would bet you a tidy sum of

cash that even he would be smiling and laughing at the events of today. Because that's what Fred and George are all about, joy. They bring joy to the lives of hundreds of people everyday, through their inventions for the most part, but for those few of us with access to them, they bring joy to us directly. It is my honor and privilege to be a part of their special day. A special day for us all. To Angelina, Alicia, Fred, and George. Salut!" He raised his bottle of Snapple in toast, and everyone in the room raised their beverage of choice as well.

Sophie had been holding Harry's non-Snapple hand, and whispered in his ear.

"Very nice, considering you refused to write something out ahead of time."

"Spontaneity is the order of the day, especially with the twins."

"Point taken. When are we taking off?" Harry wasn't wearing his watch, so he took a peek at Sophie's, which as it happened had been last year's Christmas present. It was now 9:30 am in Indiana, so they would need to be going soon, if only to establish their cover story about taking the portkey.

"In a few minutes, I want to firm up plans for Jonas and Ginny first."

And speak of the devil, Ginny was coming over to him.

"That was a nice toast, considering that you made it up as you went along."

"It was that obvious eh?"

"It was better than Charlie's, even he's saying that." Charlie of course had done the toast at Bill's wedding.

"Charlie has a lot of modesty. So are we good for tomorrow? Noon?"

"We are, though it's just for lunch right?"

“Unless you want to come back to the States with us, we have hotel reservations in Los Angeles for the night. You’re more than welcome to come along.” He doubted that Molly would go for that, but it was worth a shot.

Ginny was half tempted to take him up on it, but instead temporized.

“Let’s talk more about that after lunch. Just don’t punch that git out and get arrested or something.” McCrae she meant.

“I don’t think McCrae wants to piss me off anymore than I want to piss him off. He’s finally floating to our side of the conflict, and it’s my job to pull him in even further.”

“And you can do that?”

“As long as he doesn’t expect too much personal information, sure. I can be charming when I want to be, and I’ll throw him enough bones to keep him satisfied. I’ve been preparing for this meeting for a few weeks now.” Indeed, Harry had replaced most of his Black Library studying with a combination of McCrae prep and NEWT studying, focusing mainly on his weak subjects of Transfiguration and Muggle Studies. There was no NEWT for Wandless Magic, since only the North American schools officially taught it as a graded subject, so Harry was doing History of Magic for his fifth NEWT exam.

“I can’t wait until you’re Minister of Magic, you’ve really got the talent for it Harry.”

More than one person, including Rufus, had told him that, and the feeling left Harry a bit cold. He had bought into the muggle stereotypes about ‘politicians’, his friendship with Rufus notwithstanding, and did not much care for people lumping him in with them. Whenever he heard the term he usually thought of Fudge first, which interfered with whatever food he was digesting, even if Fudge was an atypical example. Harry was very self-aware for a 17 year old, and rightly so given his experiences.....but he was still lacking a bit in that area. He contented himself now with taking the

remark as a compliment, which is what Ginny had had in mind while making it.

“Thanks, I think. Anyway, we should probably get going on our portkey ride.” Said a bit loudly, for any prying ears. And there were, but the ears belonged to the rest of the gang, who started a 10 minute round of saying goodbye. Harry quickly found Fred and George.

“Now remember, you two have fun and don’t worry about the shop.”

“You’re not going to be there either you know.”

“Yeah, but as the only partner who ‘could’ be at the shop on a daily basis, I’m saying for you not to worry.”

“It’s a shame that we’ll miss the Hawaii part of the trip, though the island is just as good, with no attendant tourists to worry about.” They had made public plans to go on the Hawaii portion only to avoid spoiling the wedding surprise.

“I’m sure you’ll be thinking about that a whole lot, being on your honeymoon and all. Marital relations should take up the lion’s share of your time I would think.” George was nodding eagerly.

“They say that it’s better when you’re married, I know I can’t wait to find out.”

“As always my twin is 100 percent correct. You lot have fun on your college tour, but just remember, Oxford and Cambridge are better than all of them.” Hermione and Bill had told him much the same thing, and all four of them were serious when they said it, in fact Bill had fed the fact to the twins. Harry too would have preferred the British schools if he was being completely candid, but there was one issue there:

“Unfortunately Michael can’t put the fix in at those places, trust me, I asked.”

“Excuses, excuses. Anyhow, be good Junior.” The twins mussed up Harry’s hair and sent him back to the gang. He quickly went through his round of goodbyes, and made arrangements for Hermione to meet him and Jonas at The Leaky Cauldron. He didn’t know what time all that would be done, so he just told her to be ready by 1:00 pm and he would have Dobby come get her.

The goodbyes were finally done and the gang hiked out to the edge of the wards for the portkey ride back to the edge of the wards at The Hollow. This is how transport was coming to be in a magical Britain in a sort of state of war: it involved a lot of walking.

The gang got their things packed for the college tour, and took the trunk floo to Indiana, where Dobby had stashed the spare trunk a few days ago. It was now 10:30 am in Indianapolis.

The Forrester Christmas meal was due to begin at 11:00, as more than one Forrester/Davis/etc. was due to appear at another dinner later in the day. Harry had already sent a Dobby-gram to a disappointed Nick Forrester, saying that there would be no food bet this time. Warrick’s father was waiting for them when they came up from the basement, where the trunk was today.

“Did you folks have a good time?”

“It went a lot more smoothly than last year. Dad you haven’t met Marie yet have you?” He hadn’t, and they shook hands warmly.

“No, but I’ve heard all about you from these guys, welcome Marie.”

“Thank you Mr. Forrester, I’ve heard all about you and Mrs. Forrester as well.” Speak of the devil, Karen came up.

“It’s Nick and Karen, pleased to meet you Marie. How was it over there?”

“Well Mom we witnessed one engagement and were guests at a dual wedding.” Neither Forrester looked surprised about the weddings.

“Those are good boys those twins, I’m sure they’re making their women very happy.” The twins of course were now in mixed marriages, racially, and since Warrick was also in a mixed relationship, as well as Lina Peterson, they were used to things like that, and used to approving of them. Harry explained about Ron and Hermione, Nick and Karen would meet Hermione the next day on the way to Los Angeles.

“Are you boys really going to let us all down by not eating a dozen plates between you?”

“You must really be hard up for entertainment Nick, if you’re that interested in Harry and I eating.”

“Television can only take a man so far.”

Everyone started giggling, and Jonas did look a little regretful.

“It’s miracle we can eat two plates each, we do have two more dinners that we have to eat something at, in front of strangers no less.” All of them figured that they didn’t have really eat at Tecumseh, they would be there more for the company, just like Thanksgiving.

“Okay, but you owe me one bet. We’ll do it come summer, or maybe Easter.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Harry is the one who said that, and immediately got peeved looks from Claudia and Reiko. As they moved into the living room, he had to defend himself.

“Hey, you saw how disappointed he looked, I had to throw him a bone.”

Claudia did not look the least bit moved by that, and looked to be talking herself out of smacking Harry on the back of the head. And not the gentle kind like Reiko usually did.

“You’ll just have to walk it back later, won’t you?”

“We’ll see, we’ll see.”

They were interrupted by Keisha and Marty, who wanted to hear about Britain and what they did over there. Both of them had only met the twins once, at the October Quidditch game, but immediately had begun worshipping at the alter of Fred and George, their sort-of employers. More family members came over as Warrick and Harry described the wedding, they had heard all about Harry’s people at other family gatherings and were very amused by the twins and their antics. Once the honeymoon details were told, it started a wave of reminiscing by pretty much every married couple in the room about their own honeymoons, and that stretched into dinner.

Dinner was the typical feast cooked by Karen, Lina, and Grace. The dinner conversation was now focused on Marty and Keisha, who were forced to do quite the recitation of what they had learned over the course of their first four months in school. This was tradition at this table, even if the two cousins only vaguely remembered Warrick doing likewise back in 1991. They were asked to detail all of their classes, which were identical of course, even if they were in different sections in some of them, and were quizzed by pretty much everyone.

It turned out that Keisha and Marty were pretty smart, academically, both in the top third of their class so far, with what few grades had been handed out. They passed muster just fine and were applauded by all for holding up the Davis family name, even if their names were Peterson and Coyle. After dinner Karen, as the only Davis sister with no parenting with those two, presented them with their prizes:

The first Uncle Antonio installments, \$200 each, which needed to last until the beginning of February, Antonio being at his in-laws this year for Christmas. Now one might ask where they could spend all that money, not being allowed to leave Great Lakes from early January on up to Easter, and not after that until the end of the term. And for Warrick this had been a serious issue, Great Lakes not having a commissary or anything except for a couple of vending machines

outside the Dining Hall, but this was not a problem for the cousins. They had Dobby and Winky, both of whom doted on them and would go to Flackter Alley for them whenever they liked.....as long as they didn't like too often.

Keisha and Marty would soon, with Harry's bemused approval, organize a business whereby they would make a list once a week of things their friends and classmates wanted from Flackter, and have Dobby and Winky get it for them. There was a nice mark-up involved, and the elves got a third of the profit to split, with Keisha and Marty taking the other thirds, though eventually their new friend Anna Kessler was brought in as well. This diluted the pie somewhat, but it was compensated for by increased sales from the Proctor based Anna. After a couple of months they were making more than their allowance, and negotiations had begun for Harry to allow Dobby and Winky to remain a presence at Great Lakes after the gang graduated. Harry told the kids that it was entirely up to the elves, as long as no illegality was involved. Murray and Heyman knew full well what was going on, but since none of the 'imports' were booze or tobacco or anything of the like, they let it go on. They didn't let on to Harry that they knew, but he just assumed. Now more than ever Harry knew that WWW sales at Great Lakes were in excellent hands for the future.

After a dinner that featured no food pyrotechnics, there was a very limited public game show, with Ozzie Coyle, age eight, and Elizabeth Peterson, age six, getting the lion's share of attention, and lots of presents. Harry had bought them both as many board games as he could find, including a Brit-centric version of Monopoly, with British streets and landmarks replacing the familiar ones. They loved this, and immediately corralled their parents and grandparents into a game right there on the floor, though fortunately for everyone involved, Dobby was busy and couldn't thrash them as he could at every board or card game he learned. The parents all shook Harry's hand and said how glad they were that he had taken an interest in their children, both inside Great Lakes and out. He would invariably respond by saying that he was a rich punk young adult with no younger siblings to spoil, so he had adopted their kids to spoil instead.

To say that this went over very well was one of life's understatements.

The gang convened to exchange presents to non-SO's and Secret Santa people, for Warrick and Harry anyway, since the Forrester home was ostensibly Harry's base of operations during the week. Harry had drawn Martin Forrester, Warrick's grandfather, and had simply bought another snooker table, which he said would be delivered to Martin's house at his earliest convenience. Martin had played pool all his life, but had never indulged and bought a table for his home. Harry warned him though:

“Snooker pockets are a bit smaller, so be ready for some frustration at the beginning.”

Martin assured him that he would be able to handle it, and that it was always a pleasure to get a gift of something that he wanted, but would never indulge in buying for himself.

Much attention was paid to Warrick and Reiko, and whether or not there would be another engagement in the extended circle. But Warrick's present to her was a pair of diamond earrings, a pair that she had helped him pick out in the Milwaukee mall earlier in the month. They, like Harry and Sophie when asked a similar question, merely said: Soon. Nick and Karen had been expecting something more, and Warrick and Reiko took them aside and Reiko explained.

“Let's see what summer brings shall we? We'll all be together for graduation, so you might want to bring the tissue then.” She left out that her parents had put on a full court press to delay any engagement until after college was well underway. Karl and Lisa had no problem with them living together while as school, but wanted them to at least be in their 20's before rings were exchanged, the cliché 'of 'we want you to be ready'. Reiko and Warrick were both conducting a Dobby-gram campaign to get them back onboard, but it was slow going so far. They knew that they would do exactly as they pleased anyway.

Sophie went away from her usual preference for pictures and got Harry a Savile Row suit, which dovetailed nicely with his new Savile Row tuxedo, which had not been rented but was rather his Christmas present from the twins and their new brides. The suit was dark blue

and included a vest and dress shoes to go along with it. Fred and George had gotten it for her, saying that part of the cost was their present to her, and Harry was immediately urged to go try it on. He did so, up in Warrick's room, and when he got back downstairs the individual game shows stopped as they all admired it. He twirled around, just like the twins had in their tuxes, liking the present very much.

"Doesn't my lady have the best taste in presents?" He was wearing last year's gift, the picture pocket watch and indeed Harry looked very stylish. Sophie took one look at him and immediately called out:

"Winky!"

"Yes Sophie?" Winky and Dobby now came when Sophie called them.

"Please take a million pictures of that." She pointed to Harry, and though it was hard to read Winky's facial expressions most of the time, the little elf did seem impressed. She quickly left and got her camera, which had gotten worn out at The Burrow. It was a good thing that Harry had a hefty film section in his household budget.

She only took a roll of film though, a million would have been a bit much. Sophie had so far resisted opening Harry's present to her, wanting him to be there when she did it, but once he sat back down, she picked it up. She didn't shake it or anything, not wanting to break anything, and at her beau's raised eyebrows, took the wrapping paper off it.

It was a small box, with a piece of paper attached to it. She looked quizzically at him.

"Open the box."

She did as instructed, and soon heard the sounds of The Beatles coming out, singing Let It Be, the Beatles being her favorite band long before she had fallen in love with someone from their home country.

“This is so sweet, thank you.”

“Open the paper now.”

More quizzical looks, but she did so and found a handwritten list of 100 songs in Harry’s clear but somewhat sloppy printing. Harry explained.

“All you have to do is say the name of the song within two feet of the box and it’ll play it, though it’ll only respond to our voices so far.” It was a magical iPod, not that those were around back in 1997. Harry had spent most of his free period on Mondays researching the charms necessary and ‘loading’ the songs, which he judged were her 90 favorite songs, based on her CD and tape collection, and his own memory. The other 10 were his own favorites, none of which had made her top 90.....proof that they didn’t agree on everything.

“This is amazing Harry, thank you!” She carefully hugged him, as he still had the suit on.

“Well you said not to spend too much money on you, but you didn’t say anything about spending too much time.” Indeed it had taken Harry about 20 hours or so for the research and the loading, but he felt that it was time very well spent, given her reaction. The music box itself had only cost him \$50, and Dobby had found it in Diagon Alley while looking for something totally different for the twins.

The gang crowded around the list to see what was on it, and everyone seemed to agree that Harry had personalized it just right. Relations were now a little chilly with Sophie’s and Reiko’s roommates, Kelly and Miranda, who were resentful that they had not been invited to any of the super-gang’s outings, so it was quickly agreed that the Pink would go on it before they returned to Great Lakes for their final six months of ‘high school’. No one had known about it either, Harry having kept it as covert as he could. He wanted them all to be surprised, and part of him also wanted them to be very impressed, since any rich guy could buy whatever present he wanted, but it took creativity to ‘make’ a present that was both useful and charming. That was where Harry’s ego needed to be fed, and his

friends were doing him just fine on that score. He changed back into his jeans and Weasley sweater, making sure that the suit did not get wrinkled if at all possible. If there was one talent that Winky did not have, it was the ability to dry-clean. He came back down to see the others giving out presents.

Said other presents included:

Drew got Marie a nice ring, for her right hand. Marie, like Sophie, wore no rings, so it was kind of an offbeat choice. She loved it though, and would refuse to take it off for quite the long time. It would give her parents a nice shock, even if it was on the wrong hand. Drew had somehow gotten the size right by showing the salesperson a picture and a little guessing.

Reiko went in with Nick, Karen, Harry, Sophie and Marty's parents Ozzie Sr. and Grace and did a complicated swap by which Warrick got a new Nike broom and Marty inherited his old one, which was only three years old and a lot better than the one Marty had been flying. Marty's broom a starter model for someone his age, had been weak enough that Harry had been seriously thinking about buying a good one and loaning it to his young teammate. No longer though. Both Marty and Warrick were delighted with the gifts, and Warrick promised Marty that he could have the new one if Warrick played professionally, since all professional Quidditch teams supplied their players with top of the line brooms.

Reiko, Claudia, and Marie had all gotten Harry more typing gift certificates, which he was very happy about. He now had Muggle Studies taken care of for the term, with two big papers, and there was one left over for Charms too.

Harry got everyone a calendar, as usual, and each of the girls a handwritten gift certificate for shopping near the various hotels they would be staying at. Not the most creative present this time, but definitely the most practical.

At 2:00 pm they wrapped things up and got ready to continue their trip.

Next stop was the Fords, who lived in Cincinnati where they owned what seemed like half the town, though it was really just the main newspaper and a few office buildings, and a bank. They were old friends of the Steeles as it turned out, though Marie and Jonas had never met before Great Lakes, so upon being introduced, Jonas was forced to give out a recap of what his family members were up to these days.

Marie's parents, Jed and Abby, were friendly sorts, who welcomed their daughter's new set of friends with open arms. Abby's hobby was magical History, so unfortunately for Harry she knew all about him. He mused to himself that he might indeed need that book series to be written about him, as within five minutes of conversation, Abby Ford had reminded him of a few details that he had almost forgotten about.

Dinner was for 15 plus the gang, and Drew, as was the case at Thanksgiving, was given the velvet third degree by Marie's family. They liked him very much, hence the velvet-ness, and he didn't seem to mind all the questions, since they were all done with a smile. It helped that they appeared to actually listen to what he had to say. None of Marie's boyfriends previously had lasted past the six month mark, and since both Marie and Drew agreed that the week after the Olympics was their 'starting point', he had made it past the magical barrier with room to spare. No pun intended. This only increased interest in him, and the college tour was picked apart quite a bit. It turned out that Marie's paternal grandmother was a graduate of Virginia, so she made the not-so subtle pitch for her alma mater. Reiko too was the object of some interest, as the family had not gotten around to asking her about her inspiration to set Drew and Marie up in the first place. She took the kudos with a lot of smiles and laughs, and agreed that her first serious matchmaking venture had turned out pretty well in the end.

The meal was very good, the Fords had no house elves and simply employed a squad of squibs to take care of the duties attendant to any large house. Squibs were in huge demand for these kinds of jobs, since they were no magical threat but could see and understand pretty much everything that was going on. It also made their pay a bit higher than the norm, but the Fords in particular thought it was worth it. The squib population in The United States was, percentage-wise,

the second largest in the world, behind only China, and most squibs were unlike Peter Weir in that they wanted to at least be able to see the magical world, even if they could barely taste it.

The gang spent two hours at the Fords and all of them were more than willing to come back another time. Marie's parents were much like she was: agreeable, fun people without being the super-dynamic go-getters that the Baylor parents were, or that Harry and the twins appeared that they were going to be. More than once over the last few months, Sophie, Reiko, and Claudia had kicked themselves for not trying to get to know Marie better long before this. They had said the same things about Drew before that, and all agreed that they had Harry to thank for that one, since he had all but coerced Drew into joining the gang.

The penultimate stop on the Christmas tour was in Denver, Colorado and the Baylor/Connelly family get together. This was just going to be for dinner, being very carefully timed, and a spare dinner at that. Spare in that no one was remotely hungry by now. Harry had sent Dobby ahead to warn them that the gang was on it's way, and he reported back that Mitchell Baylor was now waiting at the floo for them.

It turned out that Drew's sisters were the only ones he didn't get along with, and the rest of the family was very welcoming of Drew and his friends, whom they had heard quite a bit about. Harry had been half afraid that there was going to be a duel of some sort going on, but it turned out to be relatively stress-free for him. Almost.

Dinner had started just as they tumbled through the floo, and they took their places with little enthusiasm for the smells coming from various dishes and crock-pots, but delicious smells they were. Dora Baylor, Mitchell's sister, was a professional chef with a show on one of the muggle cable networks, so she supervised everything and it was truly a magnificent feast. Harry and Jonas looked at each other for a minute across the table and seemed to come to a decision:

A decision to partake as much as they could. They wound up with four plates each, and a promise from Dora that she would be happy to have Winky and Dobby come learn some of the recipes from her

whenever they had the chance. And Harry would make sure that they would, Dora was not a professional for nothing. Her honeyed yams alone were enough to make Harry want to move into her basement, or at least take a cooking class with her.

There was one big announcement during the meal, as Hollie Baylor stood up:

“I wanted to tell you all first, being my family, that I have decided to run for President.”

Hollie was something of a practical joker, not that you would know it to look at her, so everyone paused for a moment to see if she was indeed kidding.

She wasn't, which led to a huge cheer from the 45 odd people assembled. Everyone seemed to get up from the table at the same time to go over and congratulate her. Harry and the rest of the non-Drew gang hung back and simply watched it all, the good feeling in the room was palpable as they sensed that one of their own might ascend to the highest position in the government.

There were no political parties in magical America, just a series of alliances based mainly on business interests and past history, not totally unlike Britain in that regard really. Hollie Baylor was part of current President Michael Chabon's alliance and was his personal choice to succeed him. Chabon was only 46, but had been President for two terms now and was term-limited from running again. It was widely expected that if Hollie ran and won the Presidency, Chabon would simply stay in government as one of her Department Heads, or perhaps take her place in the Wizard Congress. The Chief of the Magical Court was none other than Julius Ziegler, father of Muggle Studies Professor Toby, and he too had bestowed his endorsement on Hollie if she chose to run. There would still have to be an election of course, and Hollie would not be running unopposed, but Chabon had built his machine well over the years, so there was not going to be a huge problem unless Hollie herself created it.

Harry was the last to congratulate her, the congratulations coming because while victory was close to a sure thing, Hollie had been wary of the changes that high office would demand in her daily life.

“I’m happy for you Hollie, I know the decision was probably a hard one to make.”

“Thank you Harry, and yes it was.” She hesitated for a second, and leaned closer.

“Get Drew to those weddings and you will have the thanks of a grateful President.”

“And the gesture I requested?”

“Make sure you pay attention to the goodbyes as you leave, if not something beforehand.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Everyone was back in their seats now, and Harry pretty much just talked shop with Mitchell Baylor, who was fortunately sitting next to him. As he did this Dobby had popped over to Rufus’ home base. In hand was a Christmas present of several Black Library books that Harry wanted The Minister to have, and a message.

“Harry is at the Bayers right now Minister, and Mother of Drew is running for President.”

Rufus smiled, a very relieved smile at that. He had been hoping for such news, as Chabon’s backup candidate was not as pro-British as Hollie was, in fact he was barely civil toward anyone the Brits sent over. The special relationship would indeed remain very special. Plus there was the added bonus of Rufus being on very friendly terms already with Drew.

“Thank you Dobby, and thank Harry for me as well, and for the books. I’m sure I’ll have some sleepless nights after reading them.”

They were all duplicate titles that could be found in both The Hollow and the Black Library, but Dobby chose not to spoil the good feeling.

“Yes sir, Merry Christmas Minister.”

“And to you Dobby.”

Once dinner was over, a very tired gang, who had been up since 3:00 am Eastern time, made their goodbyes for the final leg of the journey. They were delayed a bit by Heather and Hannah, who took Drew and Marie off to a corner of the living room and were have a hushed conversation. Harry couldn't hear them, but he could read Drew's body language to know that his friend was not upset. They parted after about five minutes, and the sisters shocked the gang by hugging their brother. The hugs weren't mushy or sentimental, but were yards better than perfunctory.

Mitchell Baylor 'magically' appeared at Harry's side during all of this.

“I believe I lived up to my end of the bargain Harry.”

“He'll be there. What did you have to do to get them to do that?”

“I'll never tell.”

In truth he had done very little but give his daughters an ultimatum, saying that if his son chose not to come to their weddings, they would have to explain to their guests why their father declined to give them away. Hollie followed it up with the plea for them to show Drew that he did mean something to them. It was an effective double act, and Hollie and Mitchell would debate, good naturedly, for months about whether the other's strategy had been really necessary.

Drew would later tell the gang that his sisters had somewhat apologized for the freeze-out over the years, and that they genuinely did want him at their weddings, and as a groomsman if he was willing. Things would be different, or so they claimed, if Drew would meet them halfway.

There had been no other choice for him to agree of course, and he had promised to be there with bells on. He confessed that the five minutes was the longest conversation he had had with either Hannah or Heather in the last five years at least. The eight of them left the Baylors with a lot more good cheer than they had had going in. They walked outside and grabbed on to the jump rope portkey for the final leg in their grand tour.

Lastly, there was Tecumseh. They had missed dinner, but they all gathered in Aylesworth Corner for some apple cider and Christmas cookies and cakes. Karl and Lisa had not been able to make the Forresters' this year, since they were again left in charge of the school for the day, but knew that if there was to be an engagement announcement, they would have been summoned through the trunks. That took any possible tension for the night and put it firmly away, so it was just a night of friends. The music was provided by Sophie's new music box, which she refused to let out of her sight, or at least her person.

It was 9:00 pm in Oklahoma by the time things started to wind down. Harry and Jonas had to be at The Leaky Cauldron in seven hours time, so they were the first to give into temptation and fall asleep on the Aylesworth sofa and easy chair respectively. As he was dozing off, Harry mumbled to Sophie:

"You know, I think this might have been the longest day of my life." They had been up over 20 hours straight by now.

Sophie just pulled him closer to her and ran her fingers through his hair as he closed his eyes.

"You know, that would be perfect for a television show. Hmmm....."

End Chapter

Author's Note: The travelogues are back, and while I did some research on each of the cities they visit, please forgive how vague I've been with the locations. Let's just say that The Wikipedia is my very good friend. Keep in mind though, some is going to be made up, so if you live in the six cities being discussed please forgive me for any liberties I'm taking with them. That said, I'm not trying to sell these schools, none of which I've ever laid eyes on personally. I'm trying to sell the coming of age aspect of it, and how Harry in particular reacts to things. Also, for obvious reasons, any requirements that Freshmen live in the dorms, as they did in my days at Michigan State, are null and void here. Oh, a crack early on is made about on-time freaks, just know that I happen to be one myself, so obviously no offense is meant to my fellow brethren.

Friday, December 26, 1997

11:45 am GMT

The Leaky Cauldron

Harry and Jonas arrived 15 minutes early for their 'dates', Harry wanting to make sure that McCrae didn't have time to put up any charms or the like.....and also Harry wanted to put up some charms of his own.

"Now remember, Jefferson is the code word. If I yell Jefferson then get your butt over there and be prepared for combat."

"You don't really think that guy would try anything do you? Didn't Travis say that he wasn't that great with his wand." Travis had, he had forwarded a copy of The Ministry's official dossier on Augustus Colm McCrae, A 56 year old Scot/Manxman who wielded enormous influence in their little world. On top of the dossier was a handwritten note from Travis asking Harry very politely not to do any physical harm to McCrae, no matter how much the guy might deserve it.

"I have not survived for all this time in magical Britain, with dozens of near death experiences, to blow it all now Jonas, by being careless."

“Point taken, we’ll be ready.” His tone of voice indicated that it would be better for all of them if he and Ginny could be left alone.

“Thank you, I’m glad you’ll be here today.” Jonas was arguably the least talented Defense person in the gang, not counting Marie, who had not gotten any of the tutoring. But he was still better than nothing, and Harry really did not expect any shenanigans from the publisher.

“I appreciate that. Good luck.” He had just spotted Ginny, who was a little early herself. Jonas walked over to her and withdrew some flowers from his coat. It was a nice mixed bouquet, and Ginny’s face, already smiling, softened even more. Jonas took her hand and kissed it, and led the way over to the booth he had picked out.

Harry just stood there fighting off a grin as he approached Tom the barman, who was smiling at the sight as well.

“Hello there Harry, good to see you again.” They shook hands.

“Likewise Tom, I’m meeting Augustus McCrae for lunch, I’ll be over there.” He pointed to his favorite corner booth, right near where Ginny and Jonas had ensconced themselves. He then pointed to his friends.

“They’re on my bill too Tom, get them whatever they want.”

“Sure thing Harry, I’ll send McCrae over when he gets here.”

“Thanks mate.”

Harry went over to the booth and over the next 10 minutes put up every defensive ward he could think of, and he could think of a lot. Anti-portkey and anti-Apparition wards were key, and our boy made sure that they were overlapping. He placed two Advanced Ventriloquist sponges under Disillusionment Charms in places McCrae was not likely to touch, and thanked the heavens that he had access to the brilliant minds of Fred and George. If McCrae did a scan of the booth, it would probably take him a few minutes.

McCrae was one of those on-time freaks and arrived right at the stroke of noon. Physically speaking he was a medium everything type of person, with a calculating, but friendly smile on his face as he approached Tom, who of course knew what was going on.

“He’s over there Mr. McCrae, the corner booth on the left.”

“Thank you Tom.”

McCrae ambled over to Harry’s booth, where the young man himself rose to greet his guest.

“Mr. McCrae, good to see you again.” A lie for the most part, this being their first conversation since the October League meeting when 3,000 things went haywire all in one day.

“Good to see you too Harry, call me Gus.” They shook hands, while Harry was mildly surprised at the immediate informality.

“Sure thing.....Gus, please sit down.”

“Thank you. Did you have a good Christmas Harry?” McCrae sat down, and if he did a magical scan at any point in the meal, it was through his coat pocket, and he did not let Harry know.

“Very good actually, my friends and I did a tour of sorts. How was yours?”

“Much the same, dinner at our house, and then at each of our children’s places. Now there’s one thing I would like to say from the off here Harry: What’s said here is totally off the record, not even deep background, unless you tell me otherwise. You have my promise on that. I don’t have any Quick Quotes Quills or anything of the like on me, this is just informational, for the both of us. A chance to build a bridge, if you like.”

“Fair enough, I accept your assurances.” That he would have recorded proof of McCrae’s promise made Harry’s reply that much easier to say.

They went back to talking about Christmas, and continued on in that vein for about 10 minutes, only stopping to order their lunches and begin eating them. There was a little bit of fencing involved, but nothing too extraordinary, as Harry told the man little that was really personal, and McCrae did much the same. Or perhaps Rufus’ dossier on McCrae was so thorough that nothing would have been a surprise.

“So how was Alicia’s wedding? Which twin is she with? I can never remember.” It was asked with a genuine sense of curiosity, so Harry answered it in the same spirit.

“George is her husband now, and it was a great wedding. I was his best man as it happens.”

“She’s an excellent reporter, Alicia has a good future with us.”

“That’s good to hear, she’s a great friend.”

“I have no doubt, and you’ve helped her career along if I recall. The Snape business was fed to her by your man Tyson.” That was just one example of course, the very first.

“Was that a problem?”

“Not at all, I don’t sneer at any source that gives us a good story. I hope you’ll continue to use Alicia as your conduit.”

“And that will help her at the paper?” There was only one good answer to that question, and McCrae realized it right away.

“Of course it will, but the vast majority of her work has nothing to do with you, and she is doing great there as well.”

“I’m glad, and yes I’ll be happy to feed Alicia any stories that I can.”
As long as it was to his benefit.

“Pleased to hear it. Speaking of good stories, did our dear Minister tell you the Dumbledore news?”

“He did, yesterday.” He was surprised that the other man had waited so long to bring it up actually.

“Interesting how close you and The Minister have become over the last 12 months. A year ago at this time it wasn’t like that.” This subject was really why McCrae was in this pub, he found the Harry/Rufus alliance to be one of the key untold stories of the ‘war’ so far, and he wanted as much as he could get. He knew he probably wouldn’t get anything truly golden right away from a young man as suspicious as this one, but he was laying seeds for the future.

“We had only met once to that point, so it was more along the lines of us not knowing each other well enough.” Which was more or less the truth.

“But Biller sold you two on each other.” The publisher was not overly fond of Biller, but knew that he did not want the Head Auror of any government as an open antagonist, let alone one that also happened to be The Minister’s closest friend and confidante.

“I’m sure he was a big reason, but I don’t know all the details. I haven’t asked The Minister, and part of me is content with remaining in the dark.”

“You are his number one ally outside of Ministry circles.”

“If you say so, I don’t know how you do your rankings.”

“Trade secret, now let’s get back to Dumbledore for a moment. Were you surprised?”

“At hearing that he’ll run for Minister? Yes, though I knew I shouldn’t have been. What about you?” Harry was determined to learn as much about McCrae as the other man was trying to learn about him.

“Not that surprised, given how Scrimgeour has been knocking him down the last year and change. It was inevitable that Dumbledore would try to pay him back somehow. You’ll support Scrimgeour in the election I assume.”

“Of course, he’s done an outstanding job. What about you? I know that you have no love for Dumbledore.”

“No I do not, and while an endorsement of Dumbledore is highly unlikely, that doesn’t mean that we will be supporting Scrimgeour.”

“I know that you tacitly endorsed Lucius Malfoy during the last two elections.” His first zinger of the conversation, and McCrae just shrugged it off.

“He was very good to us, he supplied us with a lot of stories. And he and I used to be close friends.”

“Shall I ask you to roll up your sleeve?” Said with a smile, but the question hit where Harry meant it to.

“Not that close Harry, though I don’t blame you for asking.” And then McCrae surprised Harry by in fact rolling up both sleeves, one at a time, showing no Dark Mark, only a tattoo of a samurai sword on his left forearm. It was pretty intricate, and Harry leaned closer to inspect it.

“I had it done in Japan, at a muggle shop for those kinds of things, on a whim more than anything. The man was a true artist.”

“It’s very impressive, I have none of my own, yet.” He was still waffling about that.

“I imagine your girlfriend would have input on that.....or has she been promoted to fiancée?”

“No she hasn’t, and I will say no more about her, and for your sake you shouldn’t either.” No menace in the voice, but the older man knew it was coming. McCrae briefly held up his hands in innocence.

“Just asking, and no, our paper will have little to say about her unless she is directly involved in something newsworthy. Or if you two get engaged at some point, even you have to admit that that’s news Harry.”

“Fair enough. Why would you not endorse The Minister? I would think he could do a lot of damage to you if he chose to make himself your enemy.” Very true, Scrimgeour read The Prophet very carefully, just waiting.

“We would prefer to remain above what is likely to be an ugly fray. Dumbledore has never run for office before, all of his titles have been by appointment, so his record is going to be dragged through the proverbial mud. A lot of his recent record has to do with you Harry, you’re going to be in this pretty deeply.”

“That’s fine by me, anything that helps to keep Albus Dumbledore away from more power.” McCrae was nodding the whole time, as if he agreed with that. And he did.

“Will you be willing to go on the record with that when the time comes.” He mentally held his breath, and was quickly rewarded by Harry’s reply.

“In theory, yes. I won’t do a full on live interview, but send me a list of questions and I’ll send you a list of answers.” Of the questions I want to answer, thought Harry, but he just assumed that McCrae would understand this.

“Via your partners at WWW?” This had been more than McCrae had dared hope for, and he tried to keep the happiness out of his voice.

“They’re my British mail drop, yes.”

“If you don’t mind, could you give me a brief history of your business? I’m sure I know most of it, but there must be some interesting details that I’m not aware of.”

Harry saw nothing wrong with that, and gave McCrae most of WWW: A History. A few things were left out of course, like the trunks and most of the involvement of Dobby and Winky, but he figured that any free publicity for the shop was nothing but a good thing.

“And so will you be opening stores in America?”

“Not in the near future, since most of our clientele are in the schools, and we have our bases covered there.”

“And the Zonko rumors?”

“Still just rumors, they have not made a formal proposal, or even made contact with us.”

“I wouldn’t sell if I were you either, at least not while the three of you are so young. That’s your big hook you know, that all of you are young enough to relate to your customers.”

“So it would seem, and we would only sell if the twins wanted to retire or do other things. They are the creative geniuses behind the whole thing, and while I’m not a silent partner, I’m more involved in sales and marketing.”

“How are you going to handle all that, plus muggle university and Quidditch at the same time?”

“Who says I’m going to muggle university?”

McCrae’s facial expression was along the lines of ‘give me a little credit here please.’

“Surely you’re not going to leave your new friends behind? I know that most American Wizards go to university there, as their government requires a degree for most jobs.” Which was true, though Harry knew that already. The American magical government had a number of universities where they would put a Michael-style fix in for even the most hapless magical student.

“They’re not my ‘new friends’, as you put them, it’s been going on quite awhile. And yes, I’ll be going part-time, maybe two classes a term or something. Where I don’t know, and I wouldn’t tell you or any other press if I did.”

“Afraid that Voldemort will come hunting for you? I imagine that no muggle university here or abroad is as secure as a magical school.”

This was totally true, on both counts, but Harry still had no clue of how to answer that. He gamely tried though.

“Voldemort is not the only thing I think about, but yes, he has been factored into my future plans.”

“Speaking of which, what about Quidditch? Are you going to stay over there or play here?”

“I have not decided that yet, I still have three months to do so and I will probably wait until the last few days to decide and announce anything.” The first outright lie Harry had told McCrae so far.

“The betting money is on you coming back here. The Cannons are likely to get the top pick with the way their season is going and I know your friend Ron is their number one fan.”

Harry did in fact know all of that, and was intrigued that McCrae was speculating so much on his career choice, and that he had gone to the trouble of finding out who Ron’s favorite Quidditch team was. It seemed that Harry wasn’t the only one with a file prepared for the day.

“ Makes no difference, it’s all about convenience and lifestyle choices, not which team might get me. Though it would be a hoot to

play on a team with Cho Chang.” He immediately regretted saying that, but McCrae didn’t pounce too hard.

“But you would bump her if you signed with them, no team carries three Seekers, some don’t even carry two.” Cho had not played in a game all season, as she was still the understudy to Hittu Bhakta, the Seeker for the Indian National Team. Bhakta was talented enough that the Cannons might not want the ‘attention’ that The Boy Who Lived would bring to them, at least not if Voldemort was still at large.

“I could play Chaser, so any team that signs me will have multiple options on where to play me.” They talked about Quidditch for a few more minutes, Harry had made himself more familiar with the BQL over the last months while making his playing decision, so he did have things to contribute to this arc in the conversation.

All the while this was going on, Harry was having the unpleasant feeling that he was starting to like McCrae, in spite of this man having a fairly permanent place in the top 10 of Harry’s enemies list for the last few years, even if Harry had only learned the man’s name in the last couple. It helped that McCrae was at his genial best, and trying to impress Harry. It was working, though it was never far from the front of Harry’s mind that Rufus wanted him to be allies with this guy. He decided to get the unpleasantness out of the way now, before the treacle tart was served, no need to ruin dessert.

“Shall we talk now about your various hatchet jobs on me over the years? I mean we are getting along very well so far, but we both knew this would come up.”

“As long as you’re not hoping for an abject apology?”

“I’m sure something like that would have given me heart failure anyway. Why did you drag my name through the mud like you did?”

The response was immediate, and surprisingly honest.

“Because you were a convenient scapegoat Harry, and because that dolt Fudge was demanding it of me.”

“So you were not an unwilling participant.”

“No, I wanted to ruin Dumbledore and you were seen as Dumbledore’s boy, all the way up until your emigration last year. In fact it’s long been a rumor in our world here that he was Lily’s father, and for some reason placed her with the muggle Evans family to hide from his enemies the fact that he has sired a child.”

Harry paused for a moment.

“Totally off the record right now?”

“Yes, totally.” McCrae leaned forward and was not disappointed.

“I have heard that rumor yes, and I can put that one to bed for you: Not true.”

“How sure are you of that?”

“He was asked about it under Veritaserum by Travis Biller and denied being my relative in any way, aside from the fact that most pure-blood British magicals are related in some form. He said that he is not my father, grandfather, uncle or anything of the like.”

“Interesting, very interesting. Thank you Harry, the cost of this lunch was justified as far as I’m concerned.”

“Happy to oblige, I don’t want to be thought of as related to him.” And Harry was pleasantly surprised that he would not have to pay any money for this torture, though he had successfully avoided looking at his watch.

“What went wrong between you two?”

Now Harry didn’t mind getting personal, though he was aware that he was somewhat out of his depth here, verbally fencing with someone

three times his age with a wealth of these kinds of experiences behind him.

“The short version, the only one you’re going to be getting for the time being, is that I finally wised up. I took a look around me and I didn’t like what I saw, so I took some proactive steps to fix my problems. Problems that were either generated or nudged along by Albus Dumbledore, most of them anyway. There were things he could have done to make my life less harsh, and instead he did nothing.”

“Like with the Dursleys.”

“That’s one main bone of contention, yes.”

“Why do I get the idea that Dumbledore never apologized for that part of your life?”

“Because anyone with a quarter of a brain would know that, and you’re a lot smarter than that. He only apologizes with a wand to his throat, figuratively.”

“When was your most recent Dumbledore encounter?”

“No words since the League meeting at Hogwarts, though we’ve laid eyes on each other at the two League meetings since. He doesn’t seem any more eager for conversation than I do.

“When was the last time you saw your relatives?”

“A few minutes before you were fed the Snape story last July. They’re still alive and horrible, as far as I know.” Tonks, for reasons know only to her and possibly Remus, had taken to sending Harry monthly progress reports on his relatives, she was still checking up on them due to orders from Dumbledore and Moody. Said reports were not welcome for the most part, but our boy read them anyway, just in case something interesting was within. He was still contemplating retaliation scenarios, but it wasn’t too high on his list of priorities at present.

“You don’t want to revenge yourself on them? I doubt anyone would blame you.” No they wouldn’t, and that was the problem.

“I would blame me, and that’s enough.”

McCrae looked very impressed with that, the dossier had said that he had no known kills on his resume, League membership notwithstanding. So while he would approve of Harry getting revenge on the Dursleys, it’s not like he had been put to the test himself.

“That’s another thing a lot of people speculate about you Harry, just how far you’re willing to go. Oh we know you’ve killed, and you were right to do so. I watched you at the Malfoy trial every chance I could, when I wasn’t ducking for cover, and I was amazed. But you against Voldemort, that’s another story.”

“I don’t see how, I have as much incentive to off Voldemort as I have any of my other kills.”

“But he’s another kettle of fish, if you’ll pardon the saying. What did you think of Bellatrix Lestrange getting killed?”

That was not officially out there, so McCrae must have Death Eater access of some sort. Or Rufus had told him and forgotten to mention it.

“I cried myself to sleep after I heard about it, it was truly tragic.”

“Interesting that you would make a joke about it, she did put your godfather, her own cousin, through that Veil thing.”

“Well my genuine reaction was what you assumed it would be, I was very happy.”

“You didn’t want to settle her yourself?”

“It would have been nice, but not a requirement. The only ones I really want to settle with personally are Voldemort and Pettigrew.”

Harry was now fully aware that he had lost whatever control he had had of the conversation, but didn't see a way around that without being rude and potentially hostile.

"Why hasn't your friend The Minister pardoned Black?"

"I have no idea, ask him."

"Why haven't you asked him is my question."

"Who says I haven't?"

"I doubt he would refuse you on something like that." No he probably wouldn't.

"Sirius is gone, and I don't think he has much time in the afterlife to concentrate on his earthly legacy.:" And Harry even believed that for the most part, and Remus had made no attempt to persuade him otherwise. Harry mainly hadn't asked for fear that Rufus might say no. Rufus had never refused a Harry request before, and the lad wanted to keep his record perfect.

"Do you know where Fudge is?"

"Oceania, or so I've heard. Makes the most sense if you think about it, most of the people are his skin color, the accent would need to be modified only a little." Harry was somewhat surprised that Rufus had not shared the truth with McCrae, if only to get the man to stop digging for it. This would bear asking about later on.

"The same could be said for The United States you know."

"Then I must be bad at accents, since I can't do an American one to save my life."

"Tell me about Great Lakes, what are some of the differences with Hogwarts?"

“It would be a lot easier to tell you the similarities.” And so Harry did, eating his treacle tart as he did. He talked about his teachers and gave a little bit of background on Murray. This was nothing that McCrae couldn’t have read in back issues of The Chronicle, his American counterpart, but the man’s goal was to keep Harry talking.

Our boy let this go on for another 10 minutes before he swung things back, hopefully, to his issues.

“So let’s get back to you smearing me for a minute if you don’t mind. How was I a convenient scapegoat?”

“Because you were vulnerable Harry, with few, if any, people that would go on record and stick up for you. Oh Dumbledore tried, but there were times that his heart just did not seem to be into it. Everyone knew that you had no family, only the Weasleys among the pureblood families as your friends, and no one important in The Ministry who would back you, even Bones. It’s easy to fight someone who is not allowed to fight back.”

“And you had no qualms about doing this?”

“It was that or lose my license, Fudge would have seen to that, but I was not on your side even if that was not the case, I will admit to that much. It was in my best interest to knock down Dumbledore and you were a casualty of that.” Every business in Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley operated under a Ministry granted license. In theory The Wizengamot was the arbiter in a dispute between The Ministry and a merchant over a suspension or revocation of the license. That the twins had gotten a license for WWW had been one of the few major arguments between Fudge and Umbridge, though they had not opened the shop until right after her commitment to St. Mungo’s.

“I think you people gave that dolt way too much credit over the years.”

“Says the young man who rarely had his livelihood depending on his judgments on a day to day basis. Oh I know he granted your

immunity and eventually came around on Voldemort, but Fudge as an enemy was not something one wanted."

"Then why didn't he make more of a move against me?"

"He did try, he tried very hard to put you in prison two years ago remember. He failed, but the vote was close enough as to cause eyebrows to raise. After that it was only a matter of time, he was probably waiting to finish off Dumbledore first, then he would settle with you. It's ironic that Voldemort invading The Department of Mysteries is what saved you there, it got Fudge's attention off of you and onto the real problem. Once summer had come and you were vulnerable in that muggle house, things might have taken a turn toward the truly ugly. I realize that you lost Black, but if you think about what you could have lost Harry.....you might see it as an even trade." This was not McCrae spinning a web either, he had rather taken to the lad and like Bones, Biller, Tyson, and Scrimgeour before him, was relishing the opportunity to play at being a mentor a little bit, even if only for the duration of a meal.

For his part, Harry had genuinely never thought of the DOM like that before. He, Rufus, and Travis had talked about Fudge of course, but the other men had always soft-sold Fudge's animus toward Harry as the jealousy of a lesser Wizard toward a greater one. Harry had never realized just how close to the edge he had been. Suddenly a lot of things made sense to him. One small thing though:

"You said that Voldemort, and I notice you don't go in for this He Who Must Not Be Named bullshit.....you said that he was the problem. So where do you stand in the war?"

"I stand with myself Harry, as do all rational people who aren't emotionally involved, like you are. I have no problem with some of Voldemort's positions, some. But his methods are what I don't care for, there's no reason he can't go through the system to get what he wants. If he stood against Dumbledore and Scrimgeour in March, would he win? No, but he might get a plurality or force a run-off, the benefits of a secret ballot you know. I would applaud his participation too, it would show that we are all civilized to some degree, however

reluctant I would be to cast my vote for him. As for the name? He Who Must Not Be Named takes too long to say, and as long as I'm not outwardly against him, I have little to fear."

"Why don't you run?"

"For Minister? No thank you, it's a thankless job with little reward unless you really want it. People like Fudge, Scrimgeour, they love the appearance of power, the knowledge that they're the top person in our little corner of the world. But they need me Harry, they need my talents and services, and that's true power. They need you too, which is why you leveraged yourself a place at the table despite being 16 years old at the time."

"Yes."

"You're not vulnerable any longer Harry, you're no one's punching bag. That's why I've stopped my attacks on you, that's why Rufus Scrimgeour has done everything but get on one knee to get your help. No one on the 'light side', if you want to refer to it that way, wants you as their enemy. Use that how you will."

Oh he sure intended to, Harry was half tempted to ask for lunches from every powerful British magical person, if he was going to get these kinds of viewpoints. He took a long swig of his cold tea and then asked the question:

"Exactly what are you asking of me, Gus? I find it hard to believe that you're taking time out of what must be a very busy day just to get to know me."

The reply was immediate.

"Don't come after me with your wand, or send the twins after me, and keep feeding me stories about your activities and anything you feel might be of interest to me. Do that, and WWW will choke on the good reviews they'll get for their products, and you will remain mud-free in The Daily Prophet, as will your Britain and American based friends."

“Why do I get the feeling that I’m being played here?”

“Because you happen to be the most justifiably paranoid teenager in the history of magic, and you see demons where there might not necessarily be any. I’m not a knight in shining armor Harry, but we can be useful to each other.”

“What guarantees do I have?”

“None, the same guarantees that I had that you wouldn’t try to harm me today. Scrimgeour would have barely rapped you on the knuckles and I know it. But I’m here anyway.”

“Because you’re curious, that’s why. You want to see if all of the rumors and innuendo are true.”

“Yes, I’m not ashamed to admit that. We should have had this lunch a year ago Harry, and it’s my mistake that we didn’t. Some residue takes longer to dissipate than others. But we’re past that now and I hope that things can be different. We need not be friends, though you are a likeable young man, to my great surprise. But being allies would benefit us both.”

“Sounds fair. But you screw me over Gus, and The Minister and Travis both won’t be able to protect you, not that they’ll try probably.” Said in Harry’s most reasonable tone possible, which had the desired effect of making McCrae’s stomach lurch. The other man kept his composure though, and turned it into a joke.

“Just no Howlers please.”

“No Howlers then, since you’re picking up the lunch.” He held out his hand, and McCrae shook it.

“I’m assuming that we shook on a larger deal than lunch for no Howlers.”

“You assume correctly. The Minister wants me to make peace with you Gus, and you offered a good enough deal that I’m going along. I should probably tell you that if he ever turns on you, this deal is null and void as far as I’m concerned.”

“Your loyalty is laudable Harry, and I understand completely.”

A very vague answer, but Harry let it go. He was about to say he had to leave when the publisher beat him to the punch.

“Well Harry, I have enjoyed getting to know you very much, but sadly work must intrude. If you ever need to contact me quickly, have your man Dobby get hold of me and we’ll figure something out. Oh yes, I know Dobby from the Malfoys, a bit excitable but he always did a good job. Now your other elf is the photographer right? The one who gave us the Snape pictures?”

“Right, that’s Winky, she used to work for Barty Crouch Sr.”

“Yes, the one who watched over the Death Eater son of his. Interesting, very interesting, that was a fascinating story wasn’t it. You do have your life well organized, I must admit.” He rose and Harry did likewise. They shook hands again, and McCrae went up to Tom, said a few words, and was off. He entertained at the pub all the time and just put the meal on his account.

Harry watched McCrae leave, removed his wards, collected his Sponges, and went over to Jonas and Ginny. To his mild surprise, they were not snogging or anything of the like, but they were holding hands across the table. Harry would have made a funny comment about that, except for the fact that he and Sophie did that all the time, even in the Dining Hall. Still, he cleared his throat loudly as he approached, making them look up at him.

“All right lovebirds, time to go.” Both of them colored a little at hearing that, it was one of the few times Harry had ever seen Jonas bashful like that. Ginny managed:

“I notice that you didn’t kill him.”

“I’m sure you would have heard something.”

“No Daily Prophet goons trying to rough you up?”

“Oh shut it will you, are you coming to California with us or not?” He kind of hoped that she was, he would have to get to know Ginny a little better if she was to get a trunk and be part of the circle. Plus, he wanted the amusement of watching Jonas and Ginny act all awkwardly.

“Mum said I could come on one of the trips, and I’m picking the last one.”

“A burning desire to see Charlottesville have you?” That was the top academic school in the final short-list.

“I don’t want to be cliché and pick Hawaii.”

“God help Molly when you turn 17.” That was coming in mid-August, less than eight months away.

“She’s already dreading it from what Dad tells me.”

“As well she should. Dobby!”

Enter Dobby.

“Yes Harry, is it Hermione time now?”

“Yes it is, please tell her that we are waiting here very impatiently.” He winked at his major-domo and the wee fellow popped away. Hermione was to come by portkey, into one of the three designated portkey areas now in Diagon Alley, all others being warded off. The three were near: Gringotts, Flourish and Blotts, and right behind WWW. The WWW location was somewhat covert, and was Rufus’ way of rewarding the twins for being so loyal to him.

“Winky!”

Winky rarely did Ministry trips for him, but he wanted to broaden her horizons a bit.

“Yes Harry.”

“Please take this to either Minister Scrimgeour or Travis, whichever one is free.” He gave her the Sponge and she was soon away.....to Travis as it turned out, Rufus was not in the office today. Harry just assumed that Travis knew everything that Rufus did, and that telling one was as good as telling the other.

Hermione arrived in short order, Dobby having taken her valise directly to The Hollow.

“Impatiently Harry? At least you weren’t arrested for assault.”

“We had a perfectly civil discussion, for the most part.” That Harry had a nagging feeling that he had been played just a little bit didn’t need to be brought up right now.

“Besides, your dear friend Rufus wouldn’t arrest you, would he?” Smiling though she was, Hermione liked to get in her Rufus barbs whenever she could.

“I would rather not find out anytime soon thank you. Are you ready to go?”

“I am, we’re going to Los Angeles tonight?”

“We are, we have a pair of reservations at the Sheraton, and it’ll be our base of operations for UCLA and San Diego State. And yes, we’re going to Disneyland.” Hermione’s face lit up upon hearing that, she had wanted to go to California ever since she could remember, and Disneyland was a big reason why.

“Glad to hear it, when?” Still eager.

“Day after tomorrow, we’ll see UCLA tomorrow and then San Diego State the day after Disneyland.” The itinerary was well thought out. Sort of.

“Are we getting pre-planned tours?”

“We are at UCLA, one of Josh Lyman’s brothers is the Provost there and he’ll take us around. At the other places we’ll just wander around and see the sights, it’s not like there are any classes for us to see this time of year. Besides, all of us being boarding school veterans I can’t see much difference, aside from no wands being used.”

For once in her life Hermione was willing to acknowledge that she was a total follower in this instance. It was a bit strange for her, planning to travel in a country she had never been to, with people that, aside from Harry, she did not know terribly well. The idea of living in a big house with all them for four years was somewhat appealing to her, but she was still apprehensive.

The four of them left the Leaky Cauldron, after Harry paid for his friends’ meal over their somewhat strong protests. Ginny went with them to the shop to do a little work and relax, though she would have the run of The Hollow, along with Ron, while the twins and brides were at various ports of call. While the two women were saying goodbye, Harry looked at Jonas.

“So?”

“It went very well.”

“And?”

“Feel free to put that trunk inside Ginny’s room at your earliest convenience.”

“It’s already at The Hollow, I’ll send it back with her when the term starts up.”

“Nice to know that you have such faith in me.” They both grinned.

“I’m fairly observant about these things mate.” And he was very happy for them both.

Soon Hermione was, to her still ever-loving wonderment, in the Forrester basement in Indiana, being introduced to Nick. Warrick’s dad was an early riser and had even shared some orange juice with Harry and Jonas before they went over to The Leaky Cauldron.

“I’ve heard so much about you Hermione, welcome.”

“Thank you sir, this is all a bit surreal.” She was looking around at his wand making laboratory, but Nick knew what she was referring to.

“It’s Harry’s world and we’re all just supporting players.”

“HEY!”

Nick just smirked at him, he loved giving Harry the mickey, especially since he could take it. Not all teenagers could take it as well as they dished it out, but Nick Forrester respected Harry for being one of them.

“Calm down boy, I don’t want to be blown up like your Aunt Marge.”

“I really need to stop telling you stories Nick.”

“You’re too late, I think I’ve heard them all. Are you kids ready to go to L.A.?”

“Assuming everyone else is assembled up there.”

“They’re eating breakfast, or they were when I was up there last. You kids have a good trip, I’ll see you on Tuesday in Hawaii.”

“What time is Karen meeting us there?” Karen would be coming along for the UCLA trip the next day.

“She’ll be at your hotel room ready for breakfast she says.”

“Thank Nick, we’ll see you next week.” The three of them went upstairs, and shortly thereafter flooded over to the Greyhound bus station nearest to their hotel in Los Angeles. There were the nine of them going, the gang and Hermione, this being her first time in The United States. So yes, she was a bit wide-eyed as she looked at all the sites. Not that there were many from this vantage point, but Harry had said that they were pretty high up in the hotel, so she could see plenty then.

Check-in time was not for a few hours, so the gang just wandered around the area for awhile. They had an early lunch at an outdoor café, and Hermione shared some more Hogwarts stories with them. The Americans couldn’t get enough of life at Hogwarts, thankful as they were that they didn’t go there, and Hermione, over the course of July and the last week, was becoming a better storyteller by the day.

Jonas did the honors at the hotel, it was enough of a hassle for teenagers to get hotel reservations in Los Angeles that Michael Steele had made the arrangements. He confidently approached the front desk clerk, while the others hung back.

“We have a pair of reservations for Michael Steele, I’m his son.” He handed over his driver’s license, he and Marie being the only gang members to have one. At least an American one, though Harry’s British one was good for ID purposes at least.

The clerk checked the computer and found the reservations. The reservations specifically said that at least nine teenagers would be staying in the pair of rooms, and that any damage was to be billed to Michael’s credit account. Younger sons and daughters of rich people stayed at the hotel all the time, so this was nothing out of the ordinary. He handed over the keys to Jonas and pointed him in the right direction. He did have one question though:

“You folks don’t have any luggage?”

“No, it’s coming later. Thanks.”

Their rooms were two suites on the 15th floor, with beds enough for everyone if one included the conjured variety. The suites had no adjoining door, but all of them could Apparate very easily between the rooms, and relished the chance to try out their relatively untested skills. Dobby and Winky had their luggage ready for them within a couple of minutes, and soon the rooms were divided up. They had a fun time Apparating between the suites, and Harry and Drew put up a very large Silencing Bubble in each suite, so that they wouldn’t bother the neighbors. While Harry was doing this, he called for Dobby.

“Yes Harry?”

“Are we being tailed at all?”

“No Harry, no one was following you around during your walkabout.”
Heh.

“Well I didn’t think we would be, but it pays to be careful.”

“I agree Harry, but something tells me that a Death Eater would stand out very much around here.” This was Dobby’s first time in California, besides his Pathfinder visits, and he had been as excited as any of them.

“I know Dobby, I know, but we’ve been followed so much lately that I’m a little edgy about it.” Plus he had half a hunch that Rufus was keeping an eye on him, just in case, but surely Dobby would have noticed an Auror or two.

“Do not worry Harry, one of us will be with you at every moment.”

“That reassures me quite a bit Dobby, thank you.” And it did, Dobby was a defense mechanism that no Death Eater could plan for, since they wouldn’t know about him in the first place.

“May I ask why you’re so nervous Harry?”

“Because it’s real now Dobby. It’s not just a two year lark, a way to piss off Dumbledore and avoid getting killed. I have four more years here now, and when I’m nervous, I think about security.” He could barely believe that was confiding this with Dobby of all beings, but at least the reliable little elf didn’t much care for arguing with him.

“Are you having second thoughts?” As Dobby said this, he was very grateful that Harry had just finished the Silencing Bubble.

“No I’m not, I’m just a little tense is all.”

The expression on Dobby’s face was clearly screaming: ‘LITTLE!?', but he let it go for now, much to his boss’ relief.

“If you say so Harry.”

“I do, and thanks for listening Dobby, I’m glad you’re here.”

“You can always count on me Harry.”

Just then Sophie came into the room and Harry immediately started relaxing, here was the reason he was doing all of this. Dobby popped back to the shop to check on Ron, relieved that sanity had returned to the situation.

“Are you done in here?”

“Just about, at least we’ll be able to make as much noise as we want to.”

“We’re going to be the cliché? Rich guy and his entourage partying and trashing the hotel room?”

“Of course not, I’m only cliché when it amuses me to be. No, I just don’t want any complaints by management, there are nine of us you know, in one room that can generate a lot of noise, even if we don’t mean to.”

“This is strange though, I haven’t stayed in a hotel since I was 10 years old.”

“It’s nice though, I can see why some people like living in them full time. The one I stayed in during my London hiding was particularly nice.”

“What are we doing tonight?” It had all been left up in the air.

“Marie’s been here before, she said that she knows all the cool touristy things that we should go to. The Chinese Theater thing, the Universal Studios tour, things like that.” The touristy things mentioned would almost all be movie related, surprise, surprise, but no one objected. They had a fun night of it, and didn’t get back until just after midnight. It was a long day coming up.

Saturday, December 27, 1997

UCLA Campus

Los Angeles, California

9:00 am PDT

The cars came for them right on time, the gang was wary about using the floo or Apparating in a strange city like this, so Harry, again through Michael Steele, had arranged for a couple of vans to ferry them around. A small part of Harry had wanted to hire a couple of limos, but he successfully resisted temptation, even though in Los Angeles it would not have looked totally out of place. The van drivers mainly looked to Karen Forrester for guidance, so she pretended to be in charge and directed them to the UCLA campus in Westwood. She was the only ‘adult’ on this leg of the trip, and was there more as a sounding board than anything, a different perspective. She was the only one not going on the Hawaii part of the trip, as her duties as the Head of Urban Planning for the Indianapolis city government kept her hopping during the week.

They got there after a relatively short, for Los Angeles traffic, drive and arrived just as Ben Lyman was getting out of his own car. He didn't usually come in on a Saturday of course, but Josh had floored him and asked him personally to do this. Ben had heard all about Harry of course, even though he rarely saw his brother nowadays, as Josh tended to travel during the holidays, not being tied down by a wife and kids.

He had never met any of these people, but the two vans were a dead giveaway. He waited for everyone to pile out, and walked up to the kid he assumed to be Harry. There were a few benefits to fame after all.

"Hi there guys, Ben Lyman."

"Nice to meet you sir, I'm Harry Potter." He introduced everyone and hands were shaken all around.

"It's good to meet you all, I would say long trip, but I can't imagine it took more than a few seconds."

"The wonder of magic, though the weather is a lot nicer than Indianapolis. Thanks for doing this Ben, we really appreciate it."

"Well Josh has good things to say about all of you, so it's my pleasure. If all nine of you came here for school, it would more than double our magical population, we don't get many here for some reason. Even the Pathfinder kids, that's where I went by the way, they stay up north and go to Stanford or Berkeley." California-Berkeley had just missed the last cut before the final 10 schools had been decided on. It was felt that with their difficult admissions process, it was just too much to ask Michael to fix all nine of them.

"So what should we see first?"

"Let's look at the botanical gardens, it's a decent length walk from here and I can answer any questions you might have."

This was the first university official that they had actually talked to, so he got the bulk of the generic questions. Some of them were questions that any muggle would ask, some were magic-specific.

“Who here knows about our world?”

“Just me, two Professors, and six students. At least that’s the number of magical people we have here, the government keeps tabs on all of us you know. As for muggles who have magical relatives or close friends? I honestly couldn’t tell you, but I doubt it’s that many.”

“So we have to register with the government?” Harry hadn’t realized this, though everyone else knew or assumed it.

“Well as much as any muggle who pays taxes has to. The secret of our world is paramount, so Apparating in public and things like that will have them come down on you pretty hard.”

“What about the Lycans and the Kindred?”

“There are some of both here, part of the truces and peace treaties we negotiate place muggle schools of all kinds off-limits to attacks and even defensive wards. Now I know all of you go to a school that was assaulted, but even in wartime, the free zones, if you want to call them that, are never violated.”

“So no anti-Lycan wards?” Most of them hadn’t known about the free zones, though it made sense logically.

“Only on your rooms, or house in your case. That’s okay, especially as you’ll be off-campus. But on campus you are restricted from using your wand unless your life literally depends on it.”

“Can we carry them around with us?” This was Harry, who asked mainly for himself and Hermione, them never having to deal with wand restrictions in America before. He put into the side of his mind that he would probably have to do some lessons with Hermione on Wandless Magic.

“The government would prefer that you didn’t actually, there is no real need for it in your classes here or in the library and such. It’s just too easy to make a mistake. You’re not forbidden to, at least not under the law, until your first ‘incident’.”

“What about putting up other wards on our house and such?”

“Those are perfectly fine, as long as they don’t impact a stray Lycan or Kindred who happens to be wandering past. Just as long as no muggle notices anything untoward, which I know has a variety of potential meanings. I’ve heard about your joke shop from my brother, so please none of those swamps he’s bragging about Harry. Might be somewhat difficult to explain.”

“We’ll just put them inside then. What are the rules about telling any muggle friends we might make?” That was the big question on all of their minds, even Drew, who could very easily have asked his government employee parents. Drew knew that his sisters had made muggle friends at Amherst, but he was unclear about what had been shared. Uncle Antonio, as another example, had told Harry that none of his teammates or the like for the Pacers knew that he was magical. He felt that they would either think that he had gotten to where he was on more than natural ability, which was not true, or expect a little ‘help’.

“You may tell any muggle anything you wish, as long as you understand that you are responsible for them. In other words, if you tell Jane Doe that you’re a Wizard, you are responsible for the trail that leads off it.” That sounded fair, and Sophie just wanted to clarify.

“So when my squib father married my muggle mother, he became responsible for life for her keeping the secret?” Now she was interested in that part of Wendy’s story, one that she had not pressed her on at the three visits she had had with her mother in the last year.

“Right Sophie, it’s a large burden, but one that is necessary. In some other countries, further south, it’s illegal for magical person to marry a muggle, even if that magical person is muggleborn. We have

it much easier here.” Which was easy for Ben to say, since he had married a Witch.

He continued to be peppered with questions about college life and what exactly a Provost did. He showed them UCLA’s famed botanical gardens, along with Pauley Pavillion and other major campus sites. The athletes in the gang appreciated all the banners flying from the ceiling at the sports arena, the university having won more NCAA team titles than any other school in it’s division.

Lyman had gone the extra mile for them, and got them into a typical residence hall, which was the new fangled term for dormitory. It was just like Ned’s, or so Reiko and Sophie thought, without the snow on the window. They walked through the hall’s cafeteria, and pronounced it no different than what they were used to in Michigan. As they left, Warrick said what most of them were thinking.

“I don’t know whether to be impressed that there’s so much space for all this to happen, or slightly irritated that so much space is used for so relatively little. Can’t they just put all this in a hi-rise, with the hoops arena and natatorium attached? I mean Great Lakes is one building, housing.....okay, I get it now, we have the benefit of magic.” Claudia echoed that.

“Yeah, that’s what’s going to be the biggest shocker for us, going back to true muggle living. Or working, as the case may be.”

“What gets me is how careful we’re going to have to be. We can’t all be as suspicious as my boyfriend here is naturally, so we have to change our way of thinking.”

“Gee thanks Sophie, and I was not suspicious at all until I knew I was a Wizard and all hell broke loose, I was too busy running from Dudley and his gang. But to be honest, I think we’ll all be fine once we get used to it. The problem is that none of us, aside from Drew and Marie, have lived around muggles recently. Well I have, but no one in the neighborhood in Little Whinging would actually talk with me, so I was no threat. Drew, Marie, how did you handle it?” Marie went first, though Harry had forgotten about Hermione.

“I guess it’s just practice more than anything. I mean I was taught from the time I learned about magic that it was a big secret that I couldn’t share with anyone at all. I guess it’s just indoctrinated in us, and I don’t think I ever let anything slip, I even went as a Witch on Halloween a few times.”

“She’s right, I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t warned to be careful about telling people what we really did. My parents had a solid ghost history about what they did for a living, and no one ever checked up on it, at least not so I know. What about you Hermione?”

“I just claimed that I went to a boarding school up in Scotland for gifted children. That’s the story I was told to share, and I just kept my mouth shut the rest of the time. It wasn’t that far from the truth, as we certainly are gifted in our way, so it was an easy story to remember. That’s all the rest of my family knows too, it probably helps that I was 11 years old when I found out, so I didn’t have to grow up too long with the secret.”

The only other truly muggleborn person in the gang was Claudia, and her parents had been totally Obliviated about her talents over six years previous, though the cocaine and the heroin that her mother and father, respectively, were hooked on probably would have erased the memories anyway. No stories to make up there, and she had not seen them since Christmas 1991.

In all the tour took six hours, and included the gang buying Ben lunch at a faux Irish pub right off campus that he liked to go to. All of the gang, plus Karen, considered it to be the key visit, since it was the only time that someone with an eye toward their ‘special situation’ would be able to answer their questions. They had done some discreet checking, and no magicals were on the faculty or staff of their other five schools.

Ben was thanked profusely by everyone involved, and Harry had Dobby go pick out some WWW things for him to take home, Josh’s brother having earlier refused a subtle offer of payment for his time. For his part, Ben wasn’t sure whether he wanted the gang at his

university or not. He had taken a liking to all of them, and felt that they would add something interesting to the overall mix, but he knew that trouble seemed to follow Harry wherever he went. True, it had not directly affected Great Lakes yet, but he figured it was only a matter of time. Outwardly though, he had done his best to recruit them, knowing that close proximity to the Death Valley Quidditch franchise was a big selling point. He would owl Josh and say that he had done his best, and was relieved a couple of weeks later when his brother wrote him that the gang had been very impressed with him.

The evening was spent at another screening of Titanic, with Karen getting her first viewing of it. She immediately pronounced it to be a classic, raving about it on the drive back to the hotel afterward, and vowed to take Nick to see it with her the next day. As soon as she left, Warrick asked Dobby to eavesdrop on the Titanic conversation, as he knew his father could not remotely sit still for 200 minutes at a crack, even if he was watching a video.

Dobby soon reported back that Nick Forrester had meekly agreed to go the next evening, Karen had mentioned something about a 'coffee incident', and that's all it had taken to bring her husband squarely in line. There were no other specifics, and everyone laughed at the idea of Nick going crazy for that long a time in a dark movie theater. This was a conversation going on in quite a few marriages across The United States and the rest of the world, and all the men present were quite glad that they had liked the film anyway, so being dragged to it was not going to be a problem.

The next day was all about Disneyland, as the gang got there right as the gates opened and stayed all day long, getting in as many rides and exhibits as they could. The one negative thing was the lines they had to wait in, and plans were made while waiting in a particularly long one to come back during the summer on a weekday, when presumably the place would be a touch emptier.

Harry was amazed at all of this, it was his first visit to a theme park of any kind, and UCLA shot way up on his mental list if it would put him in close proximity to this place on a daily basis. He had lived in The United States for a bit less than 18 months now, minus the Wales sojourn, but he was now reminded very vividly that there was a lot

about this country that he didn't know, or hadn't experienced. Being locked up in a boarding school for most of that time was surely a factor, and to be fair he admitted to himself that he had traveled very little in Britain either, he had only really explored London. It was now occurring to him how little he had explored total in his life, and how little chance he had gotten to. This summer was going to change that, or so Harry reflected.

He was thinking all of this as they walked down Main Street U.S.A., a mockup of a traditional Midwest town of the early 20th century. Great Lakes was in the Midwest as it happened, and that one day while watching Warrick's soccer game back in August, 1996, Harry had taken a look around Seney, Michigan, but not too close. It had looked a little like this, but only somewhat vaguely. He let go of Sophie's hand and dropped back to chat with Hermione for a minute.

"What do you think of all this?"

"It's strange Harry, I've only seen the U.S. through pictures in periodicals and books. And now to see this, I mean I know that Britain and this country are very close, with a lot of similarities, but now I'm really noticing the differences."

"Just out of curiosity, are you having any problems following along with people speaking? Oh I know you're used to us, but otherwise?" In many ways American was a dialect of English, in much the same way that Australian was, or Irish, Canadian and the like were.

"Not really, though a slang word here and there escapes me sometimes. I didn't watch much of the telly during the summers and back before Hogwarts, but I've seen enough American product there to be used to it. What about you? Was it hard when you first got here?"

"The first couple of days I had to ask people to repeat things more than once, but I was immersed in it I guess, which helped."

"Ron will not adjust so easily."

“So you’re leaning toward coming over?” The logical leap to take from her reply, and she was nodding.

“If I had to bet a million pounds on it, I would not bet at all, but five pounds? I would say that yes, I’m coming here. It’s much less tense I’ve noticed, at least compared to our magical world back there, and magical people here are so assimilated. And I have to admit, if only to you, that there are parts of magical Britain that pride themselves so much on being old fashioned.....well it’s just rather offensive at times.” Ron was part of that problem, along with Molly, the Weasleys who were the most clueless about the muggle world. But Ron could also be worked on, and he had taken to movies and television quickly enough.

“I noticed that too, but it does make us need to be more careful, like we were all talking about yesterday.”

“So whose decision is this really going to be? The university choice I mean? Is it really going to be a vote?” Hermione really did believe that the others would do as Harry wanted, if for no other reason than that he was paying for so much of it.

“Yes it is, and I either have one vote or two, depending on whether your parents are going to cough up the money for your schooling. Remember my terms?”

“I do, if you pay for me, you get control of my vote. I have no problem with that, it’ll save my parents quite the load of money, small price to pay as far as I’m concerned. I had my parents do some research on our finalists here for me, and they all seem like worthy choices. What’s your thinking so far?”

“I loved UCLA, but that might have just been because it was the first one. What we decided is that we’ll have a vote after we see Charlottesville, a non-binding one. Then a month from now we’ll have the final one, to let things sink in for a little while. I’ll have a trunk installed in Ginny’s room by then, so you can come over in person and participate.”

“Do you think that Ginny or Luna would do this next year?”

“Ginny will depend on Jonas, and Luna has a career waiting for her the minute she graduates, so maybe to the first and I doubt it to the second. At least Ginny is rid of Dean, that was seriously complicating matters.” Hermione had told them all that Dean and Lavender were still a couple, though it was very ‘physically based’, to use Hermione’s term.

“At least I know you didn’t have a hand in that.” She did not say that in a ‘I hope you’ll confirm that for me right now’ tone either.

“No, my plotting is mostly for amusement and/or revenge. That was neither, at least not until after that git did his crime.”

“I’m surprised that you let up on him.”

“Your surprise doesn’t surprise me, I like to keep people on their toes. Dean’s probably spending most of his holiday in hiding, so the message gets sent either way.”

“I’m glad, I agree with you that he’s suffered enough.”

“Has Ron ever put any pressure on you like that? For physical things that you weren’t or aren’t ready for?” He was a bit dodgy about asking this of her, but felt that she owed him more than one after the series of interrogations she had given him over the last few months.

“What boy doesn’t in some fashion?”

Harry raised his hand a little.

“Not me really, I would have been fine if we had waited longer.” His first acknowledgement to anyone that he and Sophie were having sex. With the others he just said, ‘we’re having fun thank you.’

“Well Ron has been quite the gentleman, that’s all I’ll say.”

“I’m very glad to hear that. Whatever you decided should be your own choice, not forced on you by pressure from some horny boy.”

“Why am I hearing my father just now?”

“Because your father is probably scared shitless of Ron, even if he’ll only admit that to himself. I guess I would be next in line if Ron were to pull a Dean on you.”

Hermione thought about that for a moment.

“Yes, I suppose he is scared of Ron, of all of them really. He understands our world, in theory, but only in the abstract. I’m sure he realizes that any of can wave our wands at him or Mum and hurt them.”

“Are they under any kind of protection?”

“I asked Travis about that during one of our tutoring sessions, he said that all addresses and personal information for muggleborn students at Hogwarts are kept in The Headmaster’s office and in Madam Bones’ office, with no other copies. Even Jennifer Tyson doesn’t have access to them” Jennifer Tyson, Peter’s wife, was Head of Recordkeeping in The Ministry.

“Do you worry about them there?”

“Yes I do, given their profession it wouldn’t be hard to track them down, surely some Death Eaters are halfway adept at dealing with the muggle world. Dumbledore once hinted to me that he advised them to move for awhile, that he would set them up somewhere else, but apparently they refused. I haven’t asked them about it, so I don’t know.”

Talk turned to more fun matters, as Sophie rejoined them, as they got in line for yet another attraction. They left Disneyland right at closing time, and took their hired cars back to the hotel, where nine exhausted teenagers collapsed almost right away, having loads of fun was more effort than they had anticipated. Fortunately, San Diego

State was close by, and they would just stay in the same hotel for that day too. No complaints from management just yet, and the cleaning staff would be amazed at how spotless the suites were after the gang left, thanks to Winky.

Monday, December 29, 1997

San Diego State University Campus

San Diego, California

9:15 am PDT

The same car service that has served them so well the two days before made the trip with them down to San Diego, a drive that was anywhere from one to three hours depending on what time of day and the general traffic conditions. This school was chosen for the first short list based on the recommendation of one Josh Lyman, who was a proud graduate, and was never loathe to pimp his alma mater whenever he could. It also had a rising academic reputation and a great location for cultural activities. It also never snowed there, hence it's unanimous placing in the final six.

They were on their own as far as guides went, but Lisa Aylesworth was their 'adult' companion for the day. At least one of the parents would be with them on all the stops. Part of it was them wanting to chaperone, they were concerned about their kids after all, and part of it was that they wanted to be there for the next step in the 'coming of age' department. Lisa had attended The University of Utah, not on the gang's list, having 'chased' a boyfriend there, a boyfriend not named Karl of course, who was a proud graduate of Boston College, too cold to make any of the short lists. Lisa's mother had gone with her on her college tour, and she wanted to be there for Reiko, Sophie, and Claudia especially, since she considered herself a mother figure to the latter two as well.

San Diego State itself was best known for it's Science programs, and while most of them were not especially science minded, Reiko in particular was intrigued by the idea of doing something totally muggle in nature for a career, bit ironic considering she was about to be

Valedictorian of her magical graduating class. Potions was one of her strengths and she thought it much the same kind of thing. In particular was the proximity of the Pacific Ocean and the possibilities of doing more with it than as a beach and surfing area, lots of prime research being done there.

They had an enjoyable walk around campus, stopping for lunch at a nearby fast food joint in what was still a novelty for them after years of being hidden away at Great Lakes. More than one person, while they were walking around, came up to ask them if they were looking for anything in particular. When told the truth, that they were looking at colleges and that SDSU was a finalist, they were always told a story or two about the school.

Their favorite, and this was told to them by more than one person, was the story of the ghost in Zura Hall, a dorm nicknamed 'The Zoo', who had supposedly lived there since the 1970's. It was one of the most popular myths on campus, and was always good for a laugh to taunt drunken students with. The gang and Lisa, who all knew that ghosts existed of course, were fascinated by the story, and on the rest of their walk they speculated on whether it was just muggle ridiculousness, or whether there was an actual ghost there. There was an ad-hoc registry of ghost sightings and such in the government offices, and Drew promised to get on the horn to his mother and see if the Zura Hall ghost was documented there.

All in all it was a fun day, a beautiful campus, and quite the reminder that while Great Lakes Magical Institute was currently buried under a heavy blizzard, they were getting plenty of sun. The people seemed to be extraordinarily friendly too, though Warrick remarked that anyone who lived in such a nice part of the country had a little less to complain about than most.

They took the portkey ride that night to their hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii, a relative stone's throw from the campus that they would be visiting the next day. They would stay for a couple of nights there, with one detour, as the odds-on favorite was to be given a thorough going over. Joining them would be Ron and Nick, Karl Aylesworth would be their minder on the last leg of the journey in Virginia.

Tuesday, December 30, 1997

University of Hawaii Campus

Manoa, Hawaii

8:00 am local time

More sun was the order of the day as the gang walked the main campus of The University of Hawaii. This school was easily the most diverse of the six chosen, with white students in the distinct minority, and the part Japanese Reiko being part of the norm as a mixed race student. The school was gaining more and more attention for its academics, but the setting and location were what put it on the list. Just the name Hawaii evoked quite a bit to an American kid, especially one who had never been there. Warrick, as he was looking at the view in the Manoa Valley, had this to say:

“How does this school not win every sport’s championship possible? Who would turn down a free ride scholarship to go here?”

A question that every athletic coach in U of H history has probably asked themselves at some point, not that they probably got a good answer out of it.

No one here had a ready answer either, other than the expensive travel of getting home when needed, which did seem kind of weak. Ron was literally speechless, as he kept looking around with wonder. He wasn’t totally clueless about things though, and the very pale to begin with Ron made sure to put on a hat. If this was where the gang wound up, he thought he might revisit that community college idea that Harry had floated at him a week before.

Even Nick was a little awestruck, and he had actually been to Honolulu on his honeymoon 20 years earlier.

“Well this isn’t East Lansing, I’ll say that much.” Nick was Michigan State, Class of 1979.

They wandered around campus for the morning, but at visit number three they were already starting to get building fatigue. The campus bookstore was open, and they got guidebooks and the like, not only to the campus but to the islands themselves. It was agreed that this was something that they should have done in Los Angeles and San Diego as well, but Nick solved it by making a few quick calls at the nearest pay phone, getting the books ordered with his credit card, and having them shipped to the Great Lakes muggle mail drop. He felt it was worth it, since Harry was paying for the hotel and the meals and such. They wouldn't be there in time for the initial straw vote, but would be for the final one on the last Sunday in January.

Relatively little time was spent on campus, and the rest of the day and night was spent looking around Honolulu. One thing that they discovered was that the beaches were pretty crowded, though this was during prime tourist season, so they should have been busy. All of those who had been to Isla de Marauder couldn't help but compare the two locales, and the crowded beaches here came in a distant second.

Still, they liked what they saw overall, but the conversation over dinner seemed to indicate that UCLA was still slightly in the lead, Disneyland had made quite the impression.

Wednesday, December 31, 1997

Springfield, Illinois

Noon

The hardest part was telling Peter Weir why they could only stay for a few hours and not make it seem totally preposterous. Jonas saved them by having his father call Peter right before they got there:

"Yes Peter, heard so much about you. Please remind the kids that the charity fundraiser starts right at 8:00 and they can't be late." Michael was working from Harry's idea, while inventing his own dialogue.

“Oh Wendy and I would be happy to ferry them up there, it won’t be a problem.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t want to put you out, I’m having a couple of limos send them down and back. You know what kids are like these days, have to keep an eye on them every minute.” All the while he was saying all of this, Michael Steele was shaking with silent laughter, but somehow he didn’t give it away.

“Of course, I’ll have them outside and ready to go at 4:00 pm.” It was roughly three hours drive from Springfield to Chicago if the roads weren’t too bad, and they were a bit dodgy this day.

“Much appreciated Peter, let’s have lunch the next time you’re in Chicago, it would be good to meet you in person after all this time.”

“Of course, I’ll give you a call and set something up.” Peter Weir’s judgeship was still in the confirmation process, though he was expected to be sworn in sometime late in January.

“Terrific, give my best to your wife, I’ve heard so much about you over the years.” That was technically true, not that much of it was good. Michael was a big enough player in the muggle world that he had had half a mind to try and interfere with Peter’s appointment when he had heard about it, a bit of revenge for the man’s close-minded-ness about his daughter. Michael’s influence was not enough to buy a Senator, but both of the ones from Illinois would probably take his call without him being on hold for too long. He had ultimately decided against it though, wanting to take the high road if he could.

So the Weir house, for four hours anyway, was filled with teenagers. Peter had only met Harry and Warrick, though he didn’t remember Warrick of course, but he had a lawyer’s talent for remembering names and facts. He was told that Drew’s parents were a city councilwoman and a police officer, respectively, and soon buttonholed poor Drew and engaged him in a conversation about politics. With Peter safely contained, Wendy Weir took Sophie aside for a brief chat. They were on the edge of the kitchen, watching Harry

make his haggis, to their everloving horror. But bluffs do tend to be called on occasion.

“Sophie, your father and I have had a talk, and we’re going to pay for your college education, wherever you choose to go. I know we should have turned the money back on a year ago, but I had a hard time trying to figure out how to tell your father why we had stopped in the first place.”

“What did you wind up telling him?”

“The truth, sort of. That you had gotten a scholarship, and that we had set up a trust for your other expenses.”

Sophie had not expected to be talking money with her mother, but she still took the ball and ran with it anyway.

“Well I’ll take the money if you’re offering, but you know that the government pays for this kind of thing, like they did for Great Lakes.”

“Well let them pay for tuition and such, and we’ll cover your part of the living expenses.” She seemed determined to pay for something, so Sophie gave in.

“I’m sure Harry won’t mind, he’ll probably just pass the savings on to Dobby and Winky.” Sophie was waiting for the ‘are you engaged yet’ question, and was not disappointed.

“Have you and Harry spoken more about your future together?” That was a tip-toeing way of noticing that Sophie still wore no rings, but she appreciated the subtlety of it.

“My birthday, or thereabouts, that’s when he’s going to ask me.”

“Takes a bit of the spontaneity out of it though, don’t you think?”

“There were a lot engagements and marriages in Britain this month, we didn’t want to steal any spotlights.”

“Do you like his people over there?”

“Very much so, yes. You will too when you meet all of them at the wedding.....or will you be able to sneak up to Great Lakes for our graduation?”

“According to your father, I’ll be looking for a vacation spot in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. So yes, I’ll be in the neighborhood.” She was tentatively smiling, and was relieved when Sophie returned it.

“Won’t he wonder about my graduation?”

“I got a letter about that from your friend Drew’s father, he said that one of his people would be by the house near that time, and would take care of it, or so he said. I’m sure I don’t know what that means, but you must.”

“It means that Dad won’t wonder, that’s all. I’m sure it helps that I’m friends with his son, but you can count on Mitchell to take care of things.”

“You have quite the circle of friends, it seems to get bigger every time we see each other.”

“Well there are eight of us at Great Lakes, and then the Weasley family, and Hermione, Neville, and Luna.....okay, this is quite a lot, especially since there are two new Weasleys. You’ll meet everyone at graduation like I said though, only six months and change.”

“I’m very proud of you Sophie, I hope you know that.”

“I do Mum.....err, Mom. Sorry, Fred and George have infected me.”

Meanwhile Ned, who did like a spot of danger, was very blatantly hitting on Hermione. She was wearing her engagement ring, but that didn’t seem to stop him, if indeed he noticed it at all. He was listening eagerly to her tale of the first three college trips and didn’t really hide

the fact that he was checking her out. Hermione, who was not the most popular girl at Hogwarts due to her studying and rules mania, was rather enjoying the attention, and while she wasn't egging him on in any way, she was doing nothing to stop it either.

Eventually she was pulled away by Sophie, on the pretext of wanting to show the girls her old room, while Harry sidled up to Ned.

"Remember my future brother in law, you can look but not touch. Ron is the jealous type and is very willing to use magic to get revenge." Ron had only spent the one day in Hawaii, and was currently finishing up a shift in the shop back in Britain.

Ned had had no idea who Ron was before this, Sophie had never mentioned him in a letter, but he had seen the engagement ring and could easily hazard a guess.

"I know dude, I'm just practicing my flirting. I do that with girls that are taken, so I can relax and get things down." Ned had just broken up with yet another girlfriend., but had his eye on one of his platonic female friends.

That was not the stupidest thing that Harry had ever heard, but it was in the stadium.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"It's cool, don't worry, I'm not actually going to try anything. Besides, I don't think it would work between a Witch and whatever it is you people call us."

"The term is 'muggle', and it's not a slur or anything, just a way of differentiating."

"Glad to hear it. So has Dad gotten hold of you yet?"

"About what?"

"The engagement."

“There is no engagement, not yet anyway. I’m only 17 Ned, and so is Sophie.”

“Yeah, but grandpa says that people get married earlier in your culture.”

“My culture meaning magic right, not British?”

“Right.”

“It’s coming Ned, so try and talk your father down from the ledge, so to speak. No marriage is happening next year probably, unless it’s next Christmas. I’ll need all that time to prepare my people back there and have them practice being like you muggles. Trust me, that will take a year.”

“You think they can do it?”

“With enough preparation, sure. In fact the biggest worry was Arthur Weasley, but now that he’s Head of Muggle Affairs, he should be more smooth about things like that.” Harry could only hope, but it did make sense that way. Later on he would kick himself for not following up on the ‘grandpa’ reference that Ned had made, but spilled milk.

Ned did behave himself with Hermione for the rest of the time though, and she did tell Harry later on that being hit on was not something that happened every day for her, and it was very flattering in a way. She looked flattered too, and that hurt Harry a little bit, that she had been so starved for male attention over the years that all it had taken was some nebbish looking muggle to make her blush. He told her very honestly that most of the guys at Hogwarts were either morons, or they had just assumed that she was secretly dating either Ron or himself. Or both. Harry was more than willing to admit, if only to himself, that Hermione was quite the nice looking woman, and if there had been no Sophie.....

The visit lasted not one minute over the four hours, and the Weir parents got a few minutes with all of Sophie’s friends. And yes,

everyone had at least two bites of the haggis, though not one person in the house ever wanted to have it again. It turned out that Peter never did have 'the talk' with Harry, though whether or not Sophie had anything to do with this was left open to question. She did make sure that Peter always had someone with him though, so he and Harry didn't exchange more than greetings and goodbyes.

Not so with Wendy though, and as Harry was putting on his coat, she managed a few words.

"Just keep treating her right Harry."

"Don't worry Mrs. Weir, she'll be just fine."

"I'm assuming that you'll have final say on the college choice, which do you think it will be?"

"I have two votes out of nine Mrs. Weir, since I'm paying for Hermione, and I honestly don't know yet, we've only seen half the list so far. I could be comfortable at all three of them to be honest with you. They're all good, which is why they made the final six."

"None of them are close to here." A statement, not a question.

"That has nothing to do with any of you, it's all weather related. Besides, Sophie can pop in and see you whenever she wants once we graduate. Floo, Apparition, portkey. It just has to be her coming to you, not the other way around."

That had occurred to Wendy actually, that Sophie would be able to keep her at arms length, and she did not buy the weather reason for one second. But she had said what she wanted to say, and gave him a brief hug, which surprised him. She sensed that somehow.

"You are going to be part of the family after all."

"Thank you ma'am, have a good New Year." Only Molly Weasley, of the women had had known that were old enough to be his mother, had hugged him, in the years since his actual mother had died. It

touched him a bit, figuratively, and he decided then and there that yes, this woman was going to be family, and he was going to make all of this work if it killed Peter Weir. And himself.

“You too Harry.”

The gang left in the cars that Michael had sent, they were from a car service based out of Chicago that specialized in matter such as these for magical people. They were dropped off at the bus station/floor station, and were soon back in Hawaii for the rest of the day, though little was actually accomplished, other than getting better tans.

No stop was made in Modesto, California on the West Coast swing, home of Sarah Hoerauf. Harry had ultimately decided not to burden her too much with potentially betraying her schoolmates, though he had sent her a nice Christmas present, as a reward for her fine work for WWW. He had told her, via Dobby, that he would not ask for any information from her, and would not take any either no matter how good it sounded. This would have the effect of not putting her in the middle of anything, since her older schoolmates undoubtedly would want her to feed Harry and company some false leads.

This did prove to be the case as it happened, but it fell on deaf ears, as Sarah would produce a laminated card from Harry that simply read:

We won't try to use her against you, so do us the same courtesy.

Steve Atwood, by comparison, had volunteered ahead of time for his spying services, and had blithely told his schoolmates at Tecumseh that he too wasn't going to get involved either way. This was false of course, but Steve was making so much money that he wasn't about to turn on Harry. On an hourly basis, he was making more than any teacher in the place, and already had the car he wanted picked out, only 18 months from graduation for him. His schoolmates believed that, as they had a hard time even believing that the independent minded Atwood could take orders from anyone before quitting, and told him so. In truth Steve couldn't remember the last time Harry had given him an order, if it had ever happened at all.

Jessica Murray had not been asked too many questions about her WWW connections back in the Fall, though that was greatly helped by the fact that Defense teacher Ray Parker had floated a few rumors about how Harry and the twins could have found Shupe's and Corey's offices so easily. Jessica was relieved that a bigger deal wasn't made out of it, and WWW sales at Salem had actually increased, especially after so many of their products had been 'demonstrated' in the Great Lakes attack.

Thursday, January 1, 1998

University of South Florida Campus

Tampa, Florida

9:30 am EDT

Stop four on the university tour was the dark horse favorite of USF. It was somewhat close to Harry's preferred choice for his AQA destination, and was the least known school of the six. It offered the preferred weather, and while the risk of hurricanes was a bit of a factor, magical people could very quickly evacuate if that happened. USF, Florida State, and The University of Florida were popular university destinations for magical students, given the weather and the party atmospheres, as well as the nearness to two professional Quodpot teams in Florida and a professional Quidditch team. Jim Bouton, Great Lakes Class of 1997, who played Quodpot for Key West, was currently a student at The University of Miami, and he was not the only Great Lakes alumni down there.

The party factor could not be discounted, since life at all four American magical schools, not to mention the one in Canada, was relatively regimented. Even more so if one realizes that students were rarely allowed off the grounds. At Great Lakes the non-Flackter eligible kids would often go a month or more without so much as leaving the building, if the weather was bad enough. Once graduated and in the real world, these barely adult youngsters would have free reign, and it was not always to their benefit. The second largest department, next to the Aurors, of any magical government was the one dealing with memory modification, or Obliviation, and most of

their cleanup work dealt with two kinds of magicals: Young ones, or drunk ones. Or possibly even drunk young ones.

This would not be an issue with the gang, for the most part, since all of them were at least moderately disciplined, Marie being on the low end, all the way up to the extremely disciplined Harry and Drew. It helped that they could sneak away via the trunks and go wherever they felt like for the most part. Harry had long been making a private list of these kinds of things to tell Murray and Remus, his views on how to improve the magical school experience. He had figured that since the American President and British Minister valued his opinions on Defense related matters, the two Heads of school, both of whom he considered himself friends with, wouldn't mind hearing some feedback from him on this.

The hubris of youth.

Claudia was the big booster for USF, as it was currently the national headquarters for Phi Alpha Theta, a professional history honor society which promotes the study of history. That was going to be her major at whatever school they went to, and probably Harry's too, though it would take him a long time to graduate if he was going to follow through on his two classes per semester plan.

One thing had confused them though, and they flagged down a campus security officer to answer it.

"Why is this place called The University of South Florida, when Tampa really isn't that far south here?"

This was a commonly asked question, and it was explained to them that when the school was founded in 1957, it was the southernmost public university in the state. That more or less cleared it up for them, and they thanked her and were on their way. The next stop was the botanical gardens, and they spent some time walking around them, arguing good naturedly about whether or not they were better than the ones at UCLA that Ben Lyman had shown them. No clear winner appeared in that discussion, but it was enjoyable walk nonetheless.

They had picked a bad day to come to campus though, as the Contemporary Art Museum was closed for the day. This was one of the main attractions of the school, though none of the gang were artistically inclined, unless one counts Winky. They briefly thought about sneaking in, Alohomora would get them in nicely.

And then they decided to do just that. It necessitated putting a security guard to sleep, with a little Obliviation afterward, but Harry decided that it wasn't their fault that they were on a truncated timetable, and they should see everything they could at the school, so that they could render a more knowledgeable decision. They were only inside for about an hour, not wanting risk the guard's shift change or anything like that.

There was no need to see a residence hall at USF, since the vast majority of students lived off campus and commuted. Parking seemed to be pretty decent, which was a slight relief. That was one problem that they had come up with for every school: How many cars would be needed. Apparition was possible of course, but they would have to find an abandoned room or corridor for them to Apparate too. Reiko and Drew were both getting cars for graduation, and Marie already had one, so that was probably all they would need really, though they all wanted to see Harry turned loose in an auto dealership or five. That would be a full day's worth of fun on whatever summer day it happened to be on.

They left campus very satisfied, and USF was still the dark horse favorite to be chosen. All it took was five votes, the magic number, and Claudia was already speculating on who might be willing to join her in voting for South Florida on the first ballot. Harry refused to be drawn out on the subject to anyone not named Sophie, and they had already come to an agreement that their votes were not necessarily going to be the same. At least on the first ballot.

Friday, January 2, 1998

The University of North Carolina Campus

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

8:30 am EDT

This was the penultimate stop on the tour, to the school that was arguably the least likely to be picked. UNC was chosen due to strong academics, and an interesting locale. And due to the fact that only 12 magical people, not counting squibs, called the state their home, one of the lowest totals in the country, more than only Wyoming and North Dakota. That appealed to them for some reason, and that's why it had edged out the other schools on the long short list.

This was also the other school where they arranged a tour, a hastily arranged one from a friend of Uncle Antonio's who coached basketball at the school. He did not know that they were magical of course, just that they were Antonio's nephew and eight of his friends. Uncle Antonio had gone to school at The University of Texas-El Paso, and the gang had briefly considered it out of consideration to him, before deciding that it was not likely to be chosen.

Coach Ford, a former star player at North Carolina himself, took an immediate shine to Warrick, and spent the first part of the tour trying to convince him to go out for the basketball team once he got to school, as a walk on player. He assumed that any close relative of Uncle Antonio, with Warrick's size to boot, would be a good player. Warrick didn't have the heart to tell him that he was not a very good basketball player, and hadn't even started for his youth teams, despite being the tallest or second tallest player on the team in any given year.

Michael Steele was the chaperone on this particular part of the trip, he had found a reason to be in the state for business, and floored down early to spend time with Jonas and his friends. The North Carolina campus housed one of the oldest public universities in the country, dating back just over 200 years. It was far and away the most classical looking school any of them had seen on the tour, and Hermione was even moved to say that it reminded her of Oxford, though it really wasn't too similar to the British school.

It did have an old world feel to it, and Phil Ford extolled the virtues of his alma mater with gusto, with prose that would have brought a smile to anyone in the Admissions office. Professional basketball had

certainly not made him overly cocky, and it was clear that he had cherished his time here, and still did now as a coach.

“And over there is Carmichael Auditorium, where I played ball and where Michael Jordan also played.” The men’s team no longer played there, having moved into a fancier place. Jonas had read about that in a basketball book, and decided to see if the book was accurate.

“So they play in the Dean Dome now?”

The reply was immediate, and a bit weary, that term got used an awful lot.

“The Smith Center, Jonas, we prefer that it not be called the Dean Dome, for obvious reasons.” None of them thought that the reasons were so obvious, but no one asked him to clarify.

Instead Michael started querying him about UNC’s Business School, one of the finest in the world. Ford had not majored in this, but he was used to recruiting kids of this age, and was well grounded in all of his school’s programs. He, Michael, and Jonas discussed this for quite a bit of the walk, as the others just stared. It wasn’t the tropical climate of Hawaii, or the still perpetual sun of California or Florida, but the campus was beginning to beguile them. Even Claudia, wedded to the idea of going to South Florida, was beginning to think that this might be such a bad second choice.

The tour only lasted a couple of hours, as Ford had to get back to work, but he was thanked profusely for his time and knowledge. Unlike Ben Lyman, he had no qualms about the gang coming to his school, not knowing that there would be any problems inherent in it, and so his very practiced sales job had been done at full tilt. The gang spent the rest of the time just walking around, enjoying the view. They left a little after 2:00 pm, having hired a bus to drive them up to Charlottesville and their last stop. It took a lot longer than floo or portkey, but they got to see some of the countryside as they went, which made it a lot better. There was just one more school to look at.

Saturday, January 3, 1997

The Leaky Cauldron

Noon GMT

Harry was feeling a strong sense of déjà vu as he walked into the pub, though this time he was by himself. He went to the same table as before and put up his wards, yawning all the time, and making sure that the Silencing Bubble was as strong as he could make it. The rest of the gang still wasn't awake yet as they lay in their hotel rooms in Charlottesville, Virginia, the last stop on the tour. But here he was, waiting for two people, one of whom he had no real interest in speaking with. And here they were, just entering the pub now to some shocked stares and gasped comments.

Remus Lupin and Draco Malfoy.

This was the meeting that Harry had promised Remus back in July after the Q&A. He still did not want to go through with it, but Remus had repeated the request through the twins right before the Christmas Break, and this was the first day Harry could really do it, as the Hogwarts folk were due back the next day, while he and the gang did not have any classes until Wednesday.

Harry was still standing, and gritted his teeth and shook hands with Malfoy for the second time ever, and the first time that was not a stunt, as the October handshake had mostly been.

“Hello Remus, Draco. Have a good holiday?”

“Fine Harry thank you.” Harry had only seen Remus at The Burrow, though it had been a pleasant encounter.

“Right Potter, it was good.....err, Harry.” Both of them smiled, if reluctantly.

“This will take some getting used to won't it? Remus, the twins wanted me to pass this message to you. You should read it now in

case there is a reply.” He handed Remus a small piece of folded paper. Lupin opened it to find this message:

Remus, I am reminding you that you swore me an oath back in July, 1996 and I am holding you to it. If Draco attacks me or makes the change, you had better intervene on my behalf. Or else.

Harry

Remus wanted nothing more in life than to throw the note back at Harry and demand ‘or else what?!’

But a not so small part of him was afraid that Harry would do a demonstration. After all, Harry had sworn no oaths to Remus.

“No reply Harry, other than to tell them I understand.”

“Fabulous, let’s order shall we, I have some things to do in Virginia in a couple of hours.”

“How is the big tour going?”

“Not bad Remus, we’re seeing America, sort of.”

“You’re seeing the coasts of America.” He had been curious, and done some research on the schools.

“Hey, I’ve spent time in Indiana and Oklahoma thank you very much, and Oklahoma is nowhere near a coast.”

“You get there via floo and portkey.” Remus’ replies would be a little sharper because of the note, he didn’t like anyone threatening him.

“So? I’ve still felt the whipping winds of the Grapes of Wrath. Or least that’s what Karl says, I have no idea what he’s talking about really.”

Remus had read enough Harry letters and Chronicle coverage to know who Karl Aylesworth was, while Draco just sat there looking like

Draco, however confused he was about the inside references. The food was ordered and received without much more than polite talk going on, Harry ordered some pancakes, this being breakfast and all for him. He was pretty tired, somewhat irritable, and decided that it was best to get things over with. As soon as they got their food:

“Well Remus, this meeting was your idea, what do you want to talk about?”

Remus, as can be imagined, had a spiel all ready for this.

“I want the two of you to become allies in more than name only. You’re the two most powerful Wizards of your generation, along with Neville perhaps, and you need to get along. Because if you don’t, all this stuff will just repeat itself 20 years from now when you’re both running for Minister.” Remus actually looked pleased with himself after saying that, while Draco just smiled ruefully at the mental image of a werewolf becoming Minister. Harry just glared at them.

“I really wish people would stop talking like I’m going to do that.”

“Then stop making political deals with The Ministry and The Daily Prophet.”

Harry had known that rumors would spread about him and McCrae, their meeting being in public and all, but he was not expecting his friend to throw it in his face. He decided to not take this so quietly.

“What I do is none of your business Remus, I’m just ensuring my peace of mind for the near future, no more no less.” And that was genuinely how Harry had come to think of it, though he still felt that he had been maneuvered more than he would have liked to have been.

“You and McCrae wanted everyone to know that you were doing a deal of some sort, so you made it people’s business.”

“I did what I had to do to keep The Prophet off my back, period.”

“What did you promise him?”

“I repeat, none of your business.”

“Must have been quite a lot then.”

It wasn't actually, since it involved no new behavior on Harry's part, but he was loathe to tell them this for some reason. Just the sight of Remus walking in with Malfoy had given him the creeps, and his old doubts about his parents' friend were now coming back in a big way. He tried to shove them into the back of his mind, but the alarm going off in his head just wouldn't die.

Draco could feel the tension very viscerally here, and while the Dark part of him still enjoyed it, he didn't want to risk a fight at the table.

“Far be it from me to be a peacemaker here, but would you both calm down please? No Potter, I know you don't like people telling you what to do, but we don't need any more attention right now do we?”

Harry took that for what it was worth, and even directed a polite smile at his former nemesis.

“No we don't, and I have no interest in a fight here. That said, I still don't understand why you were so insistent on this Remus. Draco here has stuck to his end of the deal, and then some if you count his Umbridge testimony. I've stuck to my end of the deal in that he's still alive and kicking.” He left out that his British life seemed to be meeting with people he didn't want to meet with, over topics that he felt should have already been settled. He was reminded of something Rufus had told him after a League meeting, that his workday as Minister was mostly spent in meetings being told his business by others.

Remus couldn't resist a barb though.

“Except for one incident.” The choking in Rufus' office, still one of Harry favorite pensieve memories. He still had a lot of Draco stuff to work out, but it was getting better over time.

“Funny how Draco here hasn’t brought it up since. You have no right to be my moral arbiter Remus, so don’t even try.”

“You are so unforgiving sometimes Harry.” Remus sounded both bitter and sad about that, not that Harry was too concerned.

“Maybe it’s because I have been asked to forgive so much, that there’s not much left. You took quite a bit of it after I forgave you for abandoning me to the Dursleys. Still, as I said before, I have let bygones be bygones. Against my better judgment I must say, and I have to tell you Draco that one of the best things that has ever happened to you is me temporarily emigrating to the States. You are now, as the saying goes, out of sight, out of mind.”

“I’m well aware of that Harry, and you should know that Remus is only speaking for himself here.”

“Why are you here then?” Harry’s real question was what was Remus doing there, if this was supposed to be a ‘meeting of the minds’ kind of thing. He chose to save this for the next round of arguments.

“Because he asked it of me, and he’s been very helpful since my change in life. It’s hard to believe it’s coming up on a year now.” He sounded so calm about it, and Harry couldn’t help but relax a little.

“It has been awhile. Now let me ask you this: Are you wanting this coming together of the minds?”

“Honestly, I don’t care much either way. I see no reason why we can’t co-exist when this whole business is over with though, other than being Quidditch opponents.” Not that they would be, unless it was in tryouts for the English National Team, but he didn’t trust these two with that kind of information at present.

“Likewise. Are we done then Remus? We seemed to have reached an accord that we already reached months ago.” Harry did not make a move to get up, so Remus took it as the bluff it more or less was,

though he did not see Harry slip his wand out of his sleeve and aim it at him under the table.

“I was hoping for a pleasant meal with no dueling involved.”

“How very Dumbledore-esque of you Remus.”

“As I have told you before Harry, I would prefer that you not compare me with him, since you invariably do it as a put down.”

“Yes, but keep in mind that I can do whatever it is that I like. If you don’t want that comparison, don’t act like him.” The reply rocked Harry.

“On the other hand, being compared to a possible Minister of Magic can’t be all that bad.”

Harry’s poker face was just good enough to get by after hearing that, but his brief silence was telling, even as he tried to recover. He had told Draco?

“Why whatever do you mean Remus?”

“It’s okay Harry, I told Draco about it. In fact he helped me plant some of the Sponges in Hagrid’s quarters.”

Hagrid now bunked inside, conveniently he had taken over the quarters traditionally given to the Defense teacher, since Remus had lived at Grimmauld Place since his re-appointment, and Sarah Westbrook had a husband and young son at home in Inverness, necessitating a daily commute. Hagrid had resisted somewhat, until Dumbledore had insisted, pointing out that the danger was too great. It was unfortunate that Hagrid had not discovered many of the secret passages that connected to those rooms, but Hagrid was an absent-minded man by nature anyway. He was properly respectful to Remus, but there was no warmth in their relationship, and Hagrid had laid down some broad hints about not coming back to teaching the next year, as per his deal with Dumbledore. Remus and Sinistra were

already canvassing for a new Creatures Professor, there would be no blocking Hagrid from that door if he wished to leave.

“That’s fine by me, you were the one who garnered the intelligence, you can tell whom you want to.”

“Why thank you Harry.” Said without much irony, but Harry still didn’t like the tone.

“Let’s not forget that it was my partners who created the Sponges in the first place.”

“I have not forgotten actually. Are we at least in agreement that Dumbledore as Minister would be a disaster?”

“You bet your ass we are Remus. Draco?”

“I think the word ‘disaster’ is being charitable. Voldemort would win inside two weeks and Remus and I would be emigrating right along with you, even if we can’t join you.”

“I hear that they don’t have the same kind of Lycan problem in Canada, so probably not as many wards.” He was accidentally correct, not that he would follow up on it afterward.

“Good enough, even if it would be too cold in the winter time. The question we should be debating here: What do we do about it?”

“I assume that you two have been talking this over, what do you have in mind?”

Draco decided that the hostility between Harry and Remus, which he couldn’t really understand for the most part, necessitated him taking over here, at least from Remus. So he addressed Harry solely.

“We have to decide whether we’re going to be proactive or reactive. Your friend The Minister, and I don’t blame you for being friends with him one bit, will make his own moves, but as a candidate. And as a

candidate he will have to abide by certain rules, while we will not. The thing we have to decide is do we strike first, before Dumbledore's announcement, or wait until afterward."

Harry pondered that for a moment, he had not really thought about this too much, assuming that Rufus would have some plan that would involve Harry. He temporized for a moment.

"Who else will be running?" McCrae had hinted at a couple of names, but had given him no real specifics. Remus had heard something though.

"I'm told that Borgin will run as Voldemort's puppet candidate, though he'll probably take votes equally from The Minister and Dumbledore. The last time out Lucius only got 16 percent of the vote, but it was all from Daedalus Diggle's side." Diggle, who had died in Hogsmeade just over a year ago, had been Dumbledore's puppet candidate against Fudge, a move that had soured the now amnesia ridden Fudge on both men, and had contributed no small amount to the events affecting today. Draco actually smiled at the idea of his father, who was now in the Dementor-less new Ministry prison, getting so little of the vote.

"How much did Diggle get? Father never told me, he always said it was too much."

"He got 21 percent I believe, so it wasn't really that close. Two minor candidates split five percent, and Fudge got the rest."

Harry, for his part, had paid exactly no attention to the last election, which occurred during his Second Year at Hogwarts, having other things on his mind. Still, he just could not see Daedalus Diggle as Minister of Magic. Then again, he couldn't see Cornelius Fudge as Minister either. That reminded him, he wanted to pay Fudge a visit in Australia sometime this year, he wondered if Fudge really wouldn't recognize him. He shook that off and got back to the conversation, still somewhat amazed that he was talking about this with these two of all people.

“What are you suggesting Draco? A few planted stories in The Daily Prophet? Some rumor spread around in Diagon and Knockturn? An overt threat to the old man himself?”

“Frankly Potter, I see benefits to doing all three in concert, I doubt one of them alone would be enough to do the job. The backdoor peace talks alone would seem to sink that old fool, but you never know with our public. That’s the problem you know, they vacillate so much that it’s hard to pin down their mood at any given time. Look at your history with them: They love you, they hate you, they love you, and so on and so forth. Besides, Dumbledore can explain away almost any outrage he commits, it’s his one true political talent.”

“Just so we’re clear on something: You want Minister Scrimgeour to win, not your old friend Borgin, right?”

“Right, that fool would make a worse Minister than Dumbledore. Besides, a Voldemort puppet in power would be very bad for me, for obvious reasons. Besides, I like your friend Rufus, he’s got guts and a clever mind.”

Harry couldn’t agree more, but he was still wary of all this.

“Remus, could you excuse us for a moment, I would like to talk to Draco alone if you don’t mind.”

The look on Remus’ face clearly said that he minded a great deal, but he didn’t say anything. He just casually got up from his seat and went off toward the loo, still very casually. Harry watched him leave, then turned back to Draco, having kept one eye on him the entire time anyway.

“What the hell is going on here?”

“I gather that we’re supposed to pretend to be friends, or pretend to make a genuine effort to be.”

“Why is this so bloody important to him?”

“Because he’s worried about you Potter. He heard about the arrests of Crabbe and Goyle and he assumed that you roughed them up some. I would say that he’s apprehensive about any sliding morals you might have.”

“He’s full of dragon dung, I only hit Goyle with a pair of Pulse spells. And he’s one to talk, being an Order member, a bunch of incompetently led vigilantes for the most part.”

“Come now Potter, we only see what we want to see most of the time. He knows he screwed up by not sticking up for you before, now he’s trying to assume that ‘Uncle’ role that he should have before. A bit late, I’ll agree with you there, but you have to give him points for trying.”

“I haven’t laid a finger on him, he should be bloody grateful about that.”

“Oh he is Harry, he is. He heard about how you flogged his woman in that duel.” They both smiled at that one, a rare shared one. Tonks might be his cousin, but Draco was not terribly fond of her.

“She was too cocky.”

“You don’t like cocky, do you Harry?”

“No Draco I really don’t. And no, it hasn’t escaped me that I’m a bit cocky at times myself.”

“But you tell yourself that at least you can back it up.”

“Something like that.”

“You and I really aren’t much different you know.”

“I know we’re not.” That was easy for Harry to say to himself, or even to Sophie or Hermione. But saying it out loud to Draco Malfoy was something Harry thought would never, even happen. Until now.

“Then we should have no trouble becoming allies Potter. You’ll be thousands of kilometers away most of the year and I’ll be locked away in Hogwarts or in Malfoy Manor, it’s not like I’m going to burden myself with a real job other than Quidditch. We can meet when we choose to, rather than be forced into awkward conversations like this one. It’s not a bad deal when you get right down to it.”

Harry took his last bite of pancakes as he thought about this. Ultimately the choice was an easy one, or so he thought. He could not bring himself to trust Draco Malfoy, the scars were still too fresh for that. But he could bring himself to use Draco’s talents and intellect, all it would take was a suspension of disbelief at times, coupled with some careful maneuvering. Plus it would have the added benefit of confusing the hell out of people, and he always thought that that was a good option..

“All right then, we tell Remus when he gets back that we’ve buried the hatchet for good. We won’t be friends quite yet, just allies in the war, and whatever war comes up after this.” And he knew that there would be one.

“A professional arrangement, if you will, though no cash will change hands. Friends can wait until later on, if it ever does happen. I can get in touch with you through.....?”

“Any of my group at Hogwarts, until graduation. After that, deal through Fred and George at the shop.”

“Sounds like a plan, and you can get in touch with me the same way. Just out of curiosity, how much of this hostility toward Remus is real and how much is a put-on?”

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s mostly put-on, he’s still got a chip on his shoulder and you want to knock it off.”

“That’s close enough to the truth. Speaking of truth though, how much static did Ron give you about not putting any moves on Ginny?”

“A few veiled threats at first, though I’m not willing to risk a Howler barrage.”

“I’m sure most people think that.” Not that there was anything wrong with that.

“Which of your Yank friends are you setting her up with?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Security, you would want to keep everything as tight knit as possible.”

“Well she’s now with my friend Jonas, but the initial sparks were there before I knew anything about it. What did you tell Ron after those threats.”

“Nothing, I just ignored him. Not the best way to get rid of him, but Hermione must have had a talk with him or something. Muggleborn or not, at least you can get a halfway decent conversation from her, I don’t know how she puts up with that guy.”

“They’re engaged now, if you didn’t know.”

“I did know thank you, Tonks let it slip. I will believe that marriage when I see it.”

Harry just caught himself before he started nodding in total agreement there. Remus was now coming back, having stopped to talk to one of the other customers. Harry looked at his watch, they had a full day in Charlottesville, and he had to get Ginny over here before he could leave.

“I need to get going Draco, I’m glad that we could come to an understanding.”

“So am I Harry. I know you probably feel that you’ve come to too many understandings lately, but don’t let that bother you, it’s the way of the world.”

“I know just what you mean.” Harry got out of the booth, and bent down to tie his still tied shoe. That gave him cover and an excuse to Summon his Sponge from the bottom of the table, though it was still under a Disillusionment Charm. He got up and shook hands with a silent Remus and friendly Draco.

“Well Remus, I’ll see you next Saturday at the League meeting. Draco, I guess it’ll be March.”

“We’ll talk more then. Have fun on the last leg of your tour.”

“Hopefully I will. Take care guys.” He saw Ginny walking into the pub, apparently she had not wanted to wait for the Dobby-gram and decided to hurry things along herself.

For his part, Remus was very pleased at the rapport established between his two friends, even if it had been done while he was away from the table.

“Draco and I will walk back to the shop with you Harry, we can portkey back to school from there.”

“Sounds good.”

Ginny was greeted warmly, and the three men put on their coats, as Harry paid the bill for the meal. They were about to head out the door, when it opened and two figures emerged.

Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody.

“Well hello there you four, fancy seeing you here.”

End Chapter

Author's Note: Sorry about the week's delay, my old computer has been put out to pasture, which caused a delay with it's death rattle. Anyhow, this is the last chapter to be uploaded before Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows comes out. I'm bringing this up, because there are two things that people are most interested about DH: Who dies, and how the series ends. Now World will not be finished for a few months yet, and I want to make clear a couple of things, the first being: My ending will be different than JKR's. It helps that I'm not sure how I'm going to end it yet, but I will deliberately make it unlike hers. That said, who dies might be similar, as I have figured out that much. If Harry dies in DH, that will have no bearing on whether he dies in World, the same with the other Brit characters. A tangle I know, and that five month break I took between Chapters Six and Seven is coming back to haunt me right now.

Saturday, January 4, 1998, continued

The Leaky Cauldron.

1:00 pm GMT

“Well hello you four, fancy seeing you here.”

Harry and Draco could both tell from one shared look at Remus, that he was not the one who had summoned these two, the Headmaster was looking a little bit ill. Ginny just looked pissed, and no one present would have put it past her to slug somebody. Harry just looked at his erstwhile enemy with half a smile.

“Life is full of funny coincidences, isn't it Albus?”

Harry, as a matter of course, always had his wand in hand as he left any non-school building in the magical world. He chose not to raise it up at Dumbledore, but instead put his left hand in his pocket and squeezed on a coin.

No, not the coin from the DA, though the idea was similar. It was a danger signal he had set up with Dobby. Dobby carried the mate to the coin in his pocket, and if he felt the coin buzz him, he was to get

the cavalry over to where Harry was, pronto. In theory it was for use when Death Eaters attacked, but in the back of his mind it had occurred to Harry that this particular scenario might happen. This was it's first use, and the pressing of the coin was so slight that no one noticed. Even Moody had been looking elsewhere with his magical eye, looking for any stray Weasleys or Americans, to Harry's great relief.

"Yes it is Harry, though I must confess that this is not one of them. I was hoping that we might have a chance to talk before you go back to America." He left out who had told him, but it could have been anyone in the pub really. It wasn't out of the question that it might have even been Tom the barman.

"We have nothing to talk about Albus, and I do have plans for the remainder of my day." A day that was only 90 minutes old as a matter of fact, at least for him.

"Yes, your university tour. I must say that I'm disappointed that you choose to remain in self-imposed exile for another four years." He was expecting a rant, but only got a simple, and blank faced:

"Okay."

That was it, and while Ginny might have been hoping for a sarcastic putdown, Draco actually started laughing at Dumbledore, he liked the rank simplicity of the reply.

"I'm sorry Dumbledore, but after all you two have been through in the last couple of years, after all you put him through.....do you honestly believe that he cares about your opinions in the slightest? Particularly about his actions and behavior? Please tell me that you're not quite that senile yet." Draco's own wand was in his coat pocket, and his right hand was gripping it rather tightly at the moment.

Dumbledore wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, but Moody had something to say.

"Watch your mouth werewolf."

“Will you wash it out with soap Moody? I don’t fall under your orders, or anyone else’s besides the Headmaster here.” Special emphasis on the Headmaster part, which still gave the old man a start, even after three plus months. Which was the whole point, and it didn’t escape Moody either.

“Don’t tempt me Malfoy, I know you haven’t changed your spots totally.”

“Take a poll within The Ministry you idiot, and you’ll find that my loyalty is probably less in question than yours.” Not true really, but it did have the advantage of putting Moody on his heels a bit, and both of the older men knew that The Ministry was really none too fond of The Order.

Harry knew that he should say something here, but he was rather enjoying the Draco Malfoy show, particularly when it was directed at someone other than him, and the delay it was causing wasn’t doing him any harm either. Still, he had things to do today.

“Look Albus, I don’t want to talk to you, now or in the near future. And your begging is getting rather off-putting if you don’t mind a little constructive advice. Now they teach young men nowadays that ‘no means no’. Of course I’m not a woman fending off your fumbling advances, but this is closer to that than I am comfortable with.”

This was the sarcastic putdown that Ginny had been waiting for, and her giggles could be heard throughout the entire pub, not that everyone in the place wasn’t giving the confrontation their rapt attention. Harry just smiled benignly at her, a Dumbledore type smile he would notice later on, and then turned both eyes back to his foes.

“Now Ginny and I need to be going, so stand aside.”

The old man didn’t get a chance to respond, or indeed get out of the way, when Harry’s words were echoed by some familiar voices.

“Yes Dumbledore, stand aside.”

“In the unlikely event that you know what’s good for you.”

Those words came from behind the two older men, and were courtesy of Fred and George, who had only been back from the honeymoons for two days and were already itching for some action.

Dumbledore had turned his head to ascertain how many newcomers there were, and when he looked back at Harry, he found that Harry and Remus were aiming at him, with Draco and Ginny pointing toward Moody. The twins each had one of them in their wand sights.

“Miss Weasley, you cannot use your wand outside of school, please put it down.” Dumbledore had written that very law himself, over 40 years before. Ginny didn’t seem to care though.

“What was it Draco said about not falling under certain people’s orders? Shut up and get out of our way, NOW!” This was loud to be sure, but had no tangible effect on the situation.

“Harry, you and I need to speak, I’m afraid that I must insist. It’s very important.”

“You have 10 seconds to remove yourself from my path, or I will do it for you.” Harry was not such an old hand at Apparating that he felt he could do it here, even if it was to the other side of the door. Besides, he didn’t want to leave Ginny behind, who could only legally Apparate if her life depended on it, and this really did not fit that bill. So he needed some space to get out, and the idea of running toward the door leading to the muggle street was just not that enticing..

“Even with your numbers, that would not be a result to your liking Harry.” His wand was in his hand, but it was not pointed at anyone.

“The twins and I by ourselves could take you two out, you git. You may be the most powerful Wizard in the country Albus, but at worst I’m number three, and I’ve fought a lot more than you have over the last couple of years. Just remember, you harming me only hurts your

cause, while me harming you does very little other than make me happy.” The 10 seconds were up, but no one was really counting.

“Do what you must Harry, but we will speak today.”

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy!”

The twins had done a pre-emptive strike and fired on Moody, and the older man hadn’t had a chance, as he went down hard to the ground. Dumbledore was still unharmed, and surprisingly enough, was still smiling.

“Alecto!”

Nothing came out of his wand, as it was not a spell, but 15 people or so rose from their chairs in the pub. They were Order members, some of them familiar to Harry, but most of them not. They had trickled in during the meal, and Harry had been concentrating so much on the conversation that he had not really noticed. They advanced on our heroes, wands at the ready, though no one was reviving Moody just yet, knowing that the next spell used would be answered by the presumably trigger happy Boy Who Lived. Now it was 16-6, rather than 6-2, and Dumbledore looked at Harry with the satisfied calm of someone who knows that he just threw down an ace high flush.

“Now Harry, you and I need to speak. It does not have to be alone, but I wonder if you will want Draco to hear it.”

That was the least of Harry’s concerns at the moment, as his worst fears about Dumbledore had now been realized. He only hoped that Draco, Remus, and Ginny would be up to the task here. He didn’t let his anxiety show however.

“I believe the legal term for these events is kidnapping. I can’t wait to show my new close friend Gus this in a pensieve memory.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows for a second, before returning to his purpose.

“Shall we sit down Harry?”

Harry slowly removed his left hand from his pocket, where it had been squeezing that coin like gangbusters for the last few seconds. Said hand was empty though, and Dumbledore took no real notice. He did notice when Harry closed the distance between them, previously at two meters, down to less than half a meter.

“You’re really not going to stand aside, are you?”

“I have no interest in keeping you here after we have had a chance to talk Harry, you will be on your way to your chosen destination within the hour. I regret that it has come to this, but as you have made it so that I am not allowed to come to magical America, we must do this here.” Talking about the restraining order, and his choice of words would come into play soon thereafter as well.

“Have it your way.”

That should immediately have tipped off Dumbledore and his lackeys that something was about to go down, but the old man was so confident in his plan that he simply pointed the way to the booth that Harry and company had been ensconced in.

Harry just turned to Ginny, who was somewhat incredulous that her surrogate brother was just going to lie down for this.

“I’m sorry Ginny, I’m sorry it has to be this way. I hope you’ll understand afterward.”

Now Dumbledore felt truly triumphant, and lowered his wand to Moody, to wake him up.....which was just what Harry had hoped for.

His left hand whipped up and a blue light shot from it, slamming into Dumbledore’s face from just nine inches away.

A silent Repulsar.

Dumbledore went down like a shot, though he was not totally knocked out, as Voldemort's dream come true kicked off.

It turned out that Fred, George, Draco, and Remus had just waiting for Harry to start the show, and they immediately executed their hastily improvised battle plans. The twins poured Repulsar fire into the Order people on the right side of the pub, as Draco and Remus charged into a group of four of them on the left, knocking them over with their werewolf enhanced physical power, though neither of them made the change. They had been working on tactics just like this in their private strategy sessions, with an eye toward the final battle, or at least the next 'big' battle. Harry threw himself in front of Ginny, blocking her from fire, screaming at her:

“Make sure Dumbledore doesn't get up!”

She obeyed instantly, and a half conscious Dumbledore was soon surrounded by bats, courtesy of Ginny's famed Bat Bogey Hex. This was complicated by the fact that the twins had lifted Dumbledore up via magic and were using him as a human shield. Order members were terrified at the idea of hitting their leader, and his robes were billowing enough from the motion that both twins were pretty well covered. They continued their barrage, as their targets all took cover as best they could. The only instruction they had ever received in Wandless Magic had been so ad-hoc lessons from Harry, but they were good enough for this.

Harry was whipping out Stunners with both wand and hand, as quickly as he could, and soon The Leaky Cauldron was being half destroyed. Soon there were six people on Harry's side, all still fighting, with only seven on Dumbledore's side, not including the man himself, whose wand was in Ginny's pocket right now. Ginny put up her best Sarah Westbrook taught shield, and while the Order members were reluctant to do more than try to stun Harry and his crew, their Stupefy fusillade was not penetrating Ginny's shield, as Harry was using both his wand and his left hand to keep them busy dodging. With Fred and Harry firing like gangbusters, the rate of return fire was slowly ebbing, especially after a series of spells and curses collided in mid-air. The

key was Repulsar, which could be fired twice as quickly as Stupefy even if the caster was not great at rapid-fire. Harry and Fred were great at rapid-fire.

Draco and Remus had been content to beat the crap out of their opponents, their reflexes were just too much for four Wizards, all men in this case, who were totally unfamiliar with hand to hand combat. That part of the Leaky Cauldron was soon a little sticky with blood, as Remus in particular enraged at the turn of events, and at the betrayal. He fought extra hard, knowing in the back of his mind that his friends' son might just blame him for the old man appearing. Not true as it happened, and Harry would later note that he hadn't even had to remind him about his Oath this time.

The Order people, only two of whom had ever seen Harry fight in person, had been so confident of victory that they had not really even had a plan in case Harry resisted. This was rank stupidity beyond all measure, and was complicated even more by an Order member named Stephen Dale, a recent recruit of the old man's who worked in the Centaur Liaison Office in The Ministry, one of the lowest level jobs in the British magical government. He was wet behind the ears, and had a brief moment of panic that an enraged Harry, and the lad was certainly in that area, might try to kill him and everyone else in the room. So he acted very, very rashly.

He fired an Avada Kevada right at Harry.

Well, in the general direction anyway, and Dale's had was shaking enough that it passed right next to Harry, and only three inches from Ginny, before exploding on the very door that Harry and company had been trying to use in the first place.

And the room went suddenly very quiet. The Order people were down to four now, including Dale, all of them hiding behind various tables, the rest having been laid semi-conscious by multiple Repulsars nailing them, along with a stunner here and there. The other three, not wanting any part of this any longer, threw down their wands and raised their hands into the air, just as Travis, Rufus, Rob Graham, and Edgar Stiles crashed through the remains of the door, wave two

of the cavalry, though a hair bit late to the party. Travis took less than a half second to gain his bearings.

“Ministry of Magic, lower your wands to floor now!”

Harry barely heard his friend, as he looked right at his would-be killer, not bothering to acknowledge his friend's order. Dale had gone white with fear as he realized what he had done, and was shaking even more than he already had been. He dropped his wand to the floor and looked like he was about ready to flee, not that he could of course, the Order people had laden the place with anti-Apparition Charms. Harry just pointed his left forefinger at him, this was one of the Order people that he was unfamiliar with, though he vaguely recognized the face from Hogwarts, as Dale had just graduated last June. Harry's voice was quiet, and as filled with hate as anyone had ever heard from him.

“You're a dead man.” He advanced slowly on him, wand in the air, as Dale lost control of his bodily functions, closing his eyes in anticipation of the end.

Travis knew that a Killing Curse had been loosed, the sound of impact is unmistakable, and any halfwit could surmise right now that Dale had been the one to do it, though it was equally clear that the young doofus had panicked. Biller didn't look at his boss as he moved toward Harry.

“Harry, don't. Let justice do the job.” Not the most effective method of persuasion, as Harry's non-reply demonstrated.

“Mobilicorpus!”

And now Dale was Harry's to play with. His favorite maneuver here was usually to banish the captured foe toward a wall at high speed, if it was a normal day.

It was a normal day.

And so Dale was quickly rammed face first into the front of Tom's bar, though not in a fatal way. His face was pretty well broken, and Travis quickly snuck up to a distracted Harry and grabbed the wand out of his hand.

"Enough Harry, you don't need to do anymore to him right now. What happened here?"

Harry was still too enraged to answer, so Remus explained the situation to the newcomers. Dumbledore was now bat-free, but was disoriented enough that he wasn't contributing to the discussion just yet. Only one stunner had even grazed him, putting him into something of a stupor as well. Rob Graham put some magical ropes around him anyway, just in case.

Rufus listened to the story in horrified silence, and motioned for Stiles to wake Dumbledore up fully.

"Why hello there Albus, you've been quite the busy little beaver this afternoon haven't you?"

Dumbledore said nothing, though that was probably because Harry's Pulse spell had broken his jaw. Rufus seemed to realize that, and turned to Harry, praying that the lad would cooperate.

"Harry, are you okay?"

It took Harry a few seconds to answer, as he was slowly tamping down the rage that was still boiling within him. He finally collected himself, and faced Rufus with a grim look on his face.

"The Order of Incompetents never laid a spell on me sir."

"I'm glad to hear it. I take it that the Killing Curse was aimed at you?" Still said gently, as a handler would speak to a cobra.

"It certainly appeared to be." Travis still had Harry's wand, but everyone in the room knew that that was mere formality if Harry really wanted it to be.

Rufus motioned to Edgar Stiles.

“Get Madam Bones over here pronto, then fetch McCrae, we’ll want to spin this as soon as possible.”

“Right away sir.” Stiles quick marched to the broken door, stepped through the pieces, and Apparated back to The Ministry.

Meanwhile Rob was checking on Stephen Dale, after confiscating his wand. He did a quick Priori Incantatem of the wand and found that yes indeed, it had cast the Killing Curse.

“His facial bones are a mess, but it’s nothing that St. Mungo’s can’t take care of Minister.”

“He’s not going there, he’ll go into Lucius’ old hospital bed at The Ministry.” To hide him from Harry if nothing else, though the lad was now staring intently at Dumbledore.

“Yes sir, take him now?” Three more crews of Aurors came running into the now very crammed to the gills pub, leading Rufus to slightly change direction in his thinking.

“Not quite yet, let him bleed a little while longer. Attention Order members in the room! You are all under arrest on the charge of kidnapping and conspiracy to commit murder. Any attempt to resist and I will give Harry back his wand and let him vent some frustrations out on you. Am I in any way unclear?!”

There didn’t seem to be any questions, and the rank and file Aurors led the rank and file Order members away, fortunately none of the Order members being captured were Aurors as well.

Rufus motioned to Deputy Head Auror Sanford Jenkins.

“Sanford, get this filth out of this room. Separate them all once you get to The Ministry, and then find out what happened.”

“Yes sir.”

“Oh, and Sanford? Make sure Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt are present during the interrogations. It should be very useful loyalty tests for them.” Remus, heretofore the soul of cooperation, had his hackles visibly rise at that. Not that Rufus cared really, and Jenkins too thought it was a good idea. Remus remained quiet for the time being though.

“Consider it done Minister.”

The Order members, all bound with magical ropes, were led single file out of the pub. Moody was magically lifted and transported, those were two powerful stunners that the twins had hit him with, and his magical eye was confiscated as well, just in case. It turned out that there were only a few other customers remaining, and they were led to the back room under guard from more arriving Aurors, Rufus not wanting them to leak the news before he had a chance to figure out how he wanted it done. Bones quickly appeared and was filled in.

“What do we do now Minister?” She seemed to say this a lot, but really didn’t want to be told she was wrong in front of so many people. Rufus had no problem with her disagreeing and arguing with him in private or in front of their close circle, but public was another matter. The forms had to be obeyed and all that.

“Get a medical person in here to fix these two’s facial injuries. Harry, I’m going to give your wand back to you, but please don’t do anything rash until we’ve heard their stories.”

“If you insist.”

“I do. Travis.”

Biller gave Harry the wand back, and within a couple of minutes Dumbledore was put right as rain, in the jaw anyway, and Dale was fixed enough to talk. He was first to be questioned, sans drugs for the time being, though that would come later in the day no matter what his story turned out to be.

“What possessed you to launch a Killing Curse?”

Dale's words were somewhat mushy in sound, but he was able to be understood.

“I panicked. He was firing those weird curses, and the look on his face scared me enough that I just lost it. I'm very sorry, I know I was wrong and I throw myself on your mercy sir, and yours Harry.” He sure seemed sincere anyway.

“Did Dumbledore instruct you people to use Avada Kedavra, just in case?”

“He said only if someone used it against us first, and that was when I first joined up. All we were supposed to do today was stop Harry from leaving the room, so Professor Dumbledore could talk with him.”

This was useful information, as clearly the young man was so scared that he thought that his life was dependant on telling the truth.

However, Rufus was unmoved.

“You are under arrest, for attempted murder with an Unforgivable. Now while you do not have to fear Dementors, you will not see the sunlight for a good, long time. Your life is over.” Rufus hooked a thumb at a just returned Stiles, who didn't bother with magical ropes and simply stunned Dale. Dumbledore looked like he wanted to object, but was now aware that he had no friends left in the room, only enemies. He was now very much regretting all of those anti-Apparition and anti-portkey wards that he had had his people place. He could speak now, but waited for Rufus.

Who wasted no time, once Stiles had whispered in his ear.

“McCrae will be here in 30 minutes sir, it appears as though his daughter is in St. Mungo's right now, giving birth.” He had gotten that from the McCrae house elf major domo, and Rufus just shook his head as he quietly muttered back.

“Well, can’t blame him for wanting to be there for that. I’m sure our WWW friends will funnel Alicia Weasley with the full scoop. Good work Edgar, come right back here after you take this idiot to the holding cell.”

“Yes sir.” Stiles was no longer quite as nervous in front of authority as he had been a year ago, being in hourly contact with The Minister surely helped. He left with Dale, dragging him behind him like so much meat.

Rufus walked back over to Dumbledore, and got even closer than Harry had, just minutes earlier. His voice was one of wonderment.

“Just what the hell did you think you were doing Albus?”

The reply was as simple as it was immediate.

“I wanted to talk to Harry.”

Waiting for more, but there was none, and Travis made a point of standing next to Harry, just to make sure.

“Do you admit to having 15 of your hapless goons here to prevent Harry from leaving?”

“I did not think he would agree of his own volition, and I need to impart some information to him.” Dumbledore was not sniveling at all, though he was not acting as if he was in control of the situation.

“And you thought that was justification for breaking the law?”

Dumbledore’s reply was hair splitting legality at it’s most reaching.

“If Harry had tried to brush past me, I would not have stopped him, and he would have left. He and his partners kicked off the battle in here, not my men and I. I was only bluffing.” This did not go over very well, even the rank and file Aurors, wands pointed at Dumbledore, were disgusted.

Travis snatched Harry's wand, just in case, and Dumbledore, finally weary of Harry's taunts over the last couple of years, threw one out of his own.

"Thank you Travis, young Harry does not always show the best judgment with his wand."

It had the opposite effect that it intended though, as Harry just smiled, and strode forward, next to Rufus. He smiled at the sight, his former Headmaster bound with ropes, with a big bruise on his jaw to boot. He was halfway tempted to have Winky come take a few snapshots.

"You're tied up Albus, that's the only reason that I'm not breaking something on you, just wouldn't be cricket otherwise." His foe was unmoved.

"Please Harry, no threat from someone as inexperienced as you are frightens me. I am still Head of the Wizengamot, so please, no ridiculousness about challenging me to a duel." Apparently he was no longer groveling, and Harry did have to admire the audacity of it.

"I'll take that under advisement."

"See that you do."

Rufus, while relieved that Harry hadn't yet tried his now infamous Choking Curse on the old man, nonetheless was still mystified at the tack that Dumbledore was taking.

"Harry, come with me please. You too Remus." Travis and others were all remaining there to keep an eye on Dumbledore, whose wand was in The Minister's hip pocket. Figuratively and literally.

The three men retired to the kitchen, where Tom and his people were about to clear out, until Rufus stopped them.

“No need Tom, you were witness to the events in question. Harry, would you have Dobby fetch your pensieve? I would like to see what happened directly.”

Harry did as requested, and while he did, Rufus added a disclaimer for Remus.

“It’s not that I don’t believe your version of the events, but I want to see how Dumbledore was moving and gesturing.”

“Oh I understand Minister. And if I may, you don’t have to worry about Tonks’ loyalty in the slightest. Her loyalty is to me, and mine, politically, is to you.” He was sure convincing when he said that.

“I’m glad to hear that, and I knew as much anyway, which is why I haven’t insisted that she leave The Order. Though that might change now.” Oh yes it would, it was very high up on The Minister’s to-do list. Only four Aurors were Order members, three had resigned ‘voluntarily’, over the last couple of months. Kingsley was waffling on whether to stay in Auror Command or go to work directly for Dumbledore. Tonks, due to her Oath to Harry, was simply waiting for Travis and boss to force her to resign, after which she would.

Dobby was quickly back, and the memory was played, Dobby sticking around to see it himself, so he could give a report to Sophie. Rufus saw that while Remus had told the unvarnished truth, Dumbledore’s alibi was plausible, at least on the surface.

“Tom, will you and your staff now excuse us please.”

“Of course Minister.” Tom and his three person kitchen staff went back out into the pub, as Rufus’ arm gesture indicated. Rufus then put a Silencing Bubble around the three of them, and girded himself for the conversation to come.

“Harry, I have to be honest with you here: His story’s believability is not totally out of the realm of possibility.”

“I know, I watched him just like you did. You’ll put him under drugs?”

“Yes I will, and I have to say that if he’s telling the truth, then there’s no way the Wizengamot will do more than remove him as Chief, and they will do that.”

“I thought that they did your bidding for the most part.”

“Remus, they do what I want because I don’t go too far in any one case. If he gives that alibi while on the witness stand, and they see that memory.....well Fred and George did fire first on Moody, and you fired first on Dumbledore Harry. Now no charges will be brought against you, I can certainly guarantee that, but I would not want to take this case in front of a jury, at least not if I am asking for criminal punishment.”

“So we should have let him fire first?”

“In order to claim self defense, that is usually the best idea.” He was relieved that Harry was not more outraged, indeed his protégé seemed tired more than anything. The lack of an argument seemed to indicate that. And the big yawn that Harry let loose before his reply.

“What happens now?”

“We’ll question him about his alibi, and then I’ll convene an emergency session of The Wizengamot and get him sacked from that. They’ll go that far for me, I’m confident of that.”

“And I’m in no trouble here?”

“Of course not, any idiot watching that pensieve would agree that they would have done the same thing.....assuming that they had your power, and your minerals, if you don’t mind me saying. That was some move to take him out too, it’s not everyone who can say that they put Albus and all his middle names Dumbledore flat on his back.”

“I’ve been practicing.” A bit blasé to be sure, but his opening move had been far and away Harry’s favorite moment in the battle, upon the re-viewing.

“You fulfilled the secret wish of a lot of Ministry personnel.”

“Feel free to use it during your recruiting. Are Ginny and I free to go?”

“Yes you are, though I would prefer that you and Dumbledore not have any more exchanges today.”

“That’s fine by me. But I won’t skulk out of here. I’ll walk right out that door the way I wanted to.”

“I would be disappointed if you had said anything else.” A bit of paternal pride in that reply.

Remus had one small point to raise before they left.

“Does Harry have to come back for that fool’s trial? The one who panicked?” That generated some pause.

“Harry, do you really want him in prison for life?”

Our boy barely wasted any time thinking about that.

“Just make sure I don’t lay eyes on him anytime soon, or I’ll break every bone in his body. I don’t care what you do to him, but it would set a bad precedent if he doesn’t get jail time of some kind.”

“I was thinking 10 years.”

“Works for me, send me an owl through the twins about what happens to Dumbledore.” A still tired looking Harry left them behind and went to collect Ginny. But he had one last question as he was about to answer the door.

“Just out of curiosity, Ginny used a decent amount of magic in the last hour, yet I didn’t see any Ministry owls chastising her. What gives?”

“I made her and Luna temporarily legal back in July, I must have forgotten to reverse it.” Said with deadpan seriousness. The three of them shared a smile, though Harry’s was a weak one at best.

“As always Minister, thank you.” He then walked out the door, and his wand was back in hand.

The two men just stared at each other for a moment, and then hurried out, not wanting to miss any drama.

But there was no drama to be had, unless one counted this exchange between Harry and Draco.

“Thanks for having my back Draco, much appreciated.” He held out his hand, and Draco grasped it.

“How hard was that to say?”

“It was barely any effort at all. Have a good term, see you in March.”

“You too, have fun on your next stop.”

Harry did have one parting shot though, he had seen it in a basketball game on television. He bent down and tied his shoe for a moment.....his rear end very pointedly facing Dumbledore. He made sure to do a double knot, and then strode out his preferred door, his three Weasleys accompanying him, to no verbal comments from anyone left in the room. They walked back to the shop in relative silence, until Ginny asked the same question Harry had, without prompting.

“So I’m legal eh? That was nice of him.”

“Yeah, you lot tuned up our git Headmaster pretty well didn’t you?”:

“I did like you two using him as a shield, I can’t wait to spread this around Hogwarts tomorrow.”

Harry was still quiet, though it wasn’t that he didn’t like the byplay. He stopped right outside the shop, not wanting Ron or Lee to hear any of this.

“I’m not sure how much more of this I can take.”

Very dangerous territory, and for once, the twins were not eager to jump in. Ginny was not so bashful:

“How much more of what? Dumbledore? Doing battle like that?”

“That wasn’t a battle, it was a skirmish at best. And yeah, I’m tired of doing battle in some way every time I show my face in this country. I can’t even sit down for a meal without some kind of drama happening. This just validates my Quidditch decision even more if you ask me.” He had still not made his decision even semi-public, only telling AQA Commissioner Janet Evans that things still looked promising for her organization.

Fred then said what he and George were both thinking, and perhaps had even talked about between themselves.

“Maybe you should have killed Dumbledore while you had the chance. Or perhaps George or I should have done it. Merlin knows that we had enough opportunities in there. I don’t need to have seen a pensieve memory like you did to know that he’ll use that bollocks alibi to get off with a slap on the wrist, and there will be another confrontation in a few months. I think his irritating geniality with you is going to be gone too. Maybe we need to seek him out and end this once and for all little brother. I have to wonder if it’s come to that. Any one of us by ourselves probably couldn’t do it, but the three of us together would probably have little trouble.” His tone of voice was one of reluctance, but he was looking Harry in the eye when he said it.

Ginny couldn’t believe her ears, and turned to Harry, expecting him to shoot it down immediately. He didn’t though, at least not immediately.

“Please tell me that you’re not thinking about an assassination attempt.”:

“Not now, no. I’ve long since decided that it would do more harm than good.”

“You mean the harm in killing someone in cold blood?” Ginny was struggling to find the good anywhere in that idea, much as she seriously disliked Dumbledore.

“No, in the harm that it would do our side in the war, and in how my friends and family would think of me. You’re disgusted simply because I’m not, and yours is probably a mild reaction compared to the ones that would take place overseas. I doubt Sophie would ever look at me the same way again. If I really wanted him dead, with no thought to the reactions, I would have done it in your living room back in July. McGonagall could have been Obliviated, and the old man could have disappeared.” Indeed Travis, while not advocating such a plan, had obliquely asked Harry during a tutoring session if he considered something like that as a viable option. Harry’s slowness in response had been the same back then too.

“Just so I have this clear, you’re not going to seek him out for a duel or anything like that?”

“Nope, not within the current situation.”

That hardly satisfied Ginny, and the twins’ silence was not comforting her either. But she let it go for now, as Harry looked at his partners.

“Are you coming to Virginia with us?” They had been unsure about it before the lunch.

“Shouldn’t we stick around here, to deal with any fallout?” George didn’t want to be the one to let them know, but Fred was nodding in agreement.

“Yeah, someone is going to have to explain this to Mum and Dad, and I don’t trust Remus to do it.” He had no real good reason for that though, just a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that would ultimately go nowhere.

“Good point, though he did well today in there. He and Draco have clearly done some bonding, they make quite a team.” Harry didn’t sound like he minded about that, but George wasn’t so sure.

“That bears watching if you ask me, though I have to admit that Draco has toed the line for 10 months now. We really have nothing to complain about.”

“Shades of our attitude toward Ron, looking for things to bitch about even when there aren’t any. Anyway, we should get going, who knows what Dobby told the others. If you need anything, we’ll have a trunk with us in Virginia, and Dobby and Winky will know where to find us.” The ‘cavalry’ option only extended to Sophie and the American gang if Harry was hospitalized or otherwise injured.

“Sure thing, have fun over there.” They slapped hands, and Harry and Ginny went through the back door, avoiding Ron and Lee, figuring that the twins would fill them in. The doors weren’t soundproof on the inside, and they opened the trunk to climb down, they heard Ron yell out:

“WHAT!?”

They decided that the twins could handle it, and a minute later, they were in Harry’s motel room, one of two that they had taken for the night and day. The others were up, in various states of getting ready. Sophie was sitting on the bed, watching MTV, when she saw the trunk open. She had a big smile on her face until she saw the grim looks on Harry’s and Ginny’s.

“Uh oh, what happened?”

“Oh the usual, a fight broke out, someone tried to kill me. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Eh?” Sophie at first thought he was kidding, but was quickly disabused of that notion.

“I’ll go get the others, no need to tell this story more than once if I don’t have to.” Harry Apparated to the other room, and soon he was re-living the moment to all of his friends, plus their guest chaperone Karl Aylesworth. The memory of it played to dead silence, and neither Harry nor Ginny offered a commentary at all. He stopped at the moment when he joined Remus and Rufus in the kitchen, and merely described what happened after that. Leaving out the part of the twins suggesting they kill Dumbledore, that would not have gone over very well, as Harry had surmised to his partners.

Sophie thought she was going to be sick, but held it down, she was not sure how much more she could take either. Karl, who had never met any of the Brit players in our story, other than Hermione just yesterday, was the most incredulous.

“So not only does he attempt to kidnap you, nothing is going to happen to him? And the man that tried to kill you?”

“Oh that guy will go to prison, since all we used were Repulsar, Stupefy, and Petrificus Totalus. Hardly a justification for thinking his life was in danger. Dumbledore will lose his spot as Head of the Wizengamot, and maybe even his spot in it period. Plus I got to break his jaw. Take away the Avada Kedavra mess and I probably came out ahead in the day.” He said that so matter-of-factly that now Karl was the one tamping down nausea.

“I honestly don’t know how you’re still sane, after living there.”

“Who says I still am?” Personally, Harry thought had passed right through insanity and gone on to the other side, back to being sane. This was just his theory, and Sophie didn’t totally disagree with it, after hearing some of his stories.

“Very funny. What are you going to do now?” Karl didn’t know whether he was relieved that Harry was so calm about the whole

thing, or if it worried him. Reiko had told him once that Harry's famed temper was mostly an act, and that he had never yelled at any of his friends or tried to give them any orders, apart from the tiny dustup after he had been shot. Magical America did contain some psychiatrists, and Karl was one more incident away from attempting to get some referrals for his daughter's friend. He liked the lad a lot, but was increasingly worried about the long-term damage that was accruing here.

"I'm going to take a shower, then we're going to campus and see the last school on our tour. The so-called adults over there can handle the rest of this one, I have more important things to do." He had Dobby put away the pensieve, and took his leave to wipe the Dumbledore off of him, taking a good 15 minute shower, doing some magic to the shower head to make the hot water last a lot longer. It had the considerable effect of refreshing him, and the knowledge that he was far away from Dumbledore and all of his troubles went a long way toward improving his general mood. In theory, no non-Weasley should know exactly where he was right now.

While he was in there, Ginny was peppered with questions that she could barely begin to answer, but everyone appeared to be satisfied. The whole 'preemptive strike doctrine' that her brother had proposed was still weighing on her, not that she mentioned it either. She resolved to have a talk with her parents about all of this before she went back to school the next day. The Hogwarts Express left Kings Cross in less than 24 hours, but she would have time enough, if she didn't mind losing sleep.

The gang's motel was just half a mile from campus, so no need for a car service this day. They stopped by the franchised fast food eatery next door, and ate breakfast as they walked, it wasn't as cold as it could have been for early January, and they all had Warming Charms on in any case. The Dumbledore matter was not avoided, as Sophie and Warrick in particular thought it was best to get the whole thing talked about, so if there was silence, it would be because everyone was just sick of the topic. Harry warned Hermione about Ron's initial reaction, but she just waved it off.

“He’ll be fine, he detests Dumbledore almost as much as you do. It should even bond him and Ginny a little more even, after she Bat-Bogeyed him. That was quite a sight by the way, I missed a lot of other things because I was staring at that for so long: Dumbledore surrounded by bats, being hung in the air as a shield. I’ve seen a lot in my time, but that takes the cake.” Hermione was all of 18 years old, but somehow she didn’t sound ridiculous saying that.

“What do you think will happen to him?”

“A slap on the wrist, like you said. I wonder if any prison could even hold Dumbledore. As much power as he has, they would probably have to keep him sedated the whole time.”

That thought had never occurred to Harry, and he smiled.

“It’s great to have you around again Hermione.”

“I’m glad, it’ll be good to see more of you, once the trunk goes into Ginny’s room, no need for letters or Dobby-grams anymore.” She seemed really pleased that Harry was pleased, and one could assume that their relationship was pretty much caulked up. Sophie just stood next to Harry, looking pleased. She knew that Hermione was no threat, and she liked the other woman enough to be glad that fences were now officially mended.

“It can be moved too, so that Ron and Neville can come over if they want to. The twins will tell you lot how to set it up and everything.”

They quickly reached the UVA campus, and soon the famous Rotunda was in sight. It wasn’t the original model, that had been destroyed in a fire almost 100 years previous, but it was still an impressive sight. The campus had largely been designed by former U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, the only American President to be magical, though Jefferson’s magical power was somewhat limited. As a result though, the school had more magicals than any other school in the country, currently housing 35 in various years, not counting seven on the faculty, the Jefferson connection being a huge draw. The gang had eschewed getting a tour from any though, wanting this

last school to be experienced fresh, with no biases. It's academic record spoke for itself, and Drew had been very vociferous in his plugging of it during the short-list discussions back in December. No question where his vote was going to go.

The school population was less than 20,000, making it the smallest school on the short list, and Charlottesville, though larger than Chapel Hill, was not a huge metropolis either. The campus itself was not a large one, area-wise, so it did not take them long to walk it.

Well it wouldn't have, if they hadn't stopped to gawk so much. The campus combined the old world with the modern, much as North Carolina. The 10 Pavilions, which flanked the Rotunda, were of particular interest. They surrounded the student rooms, and were interesting enough that Harry had Winky take some pictures on the sly. Right before lunch, they ran into Diego Almodovar, a Great Lakes graduate of three years earlier who had played Quodpot with Jonas for Jefferson. He didn't have time to give them a real tour, but he happily answered 15 minutes worth of questions. Ending with:

"Trust me, you could not go wrong picking UVA. We have our own little magical fraternity here and would more than welcome you guys to join. It's not in the official Greek system of course, since it fits the definition of a closed club, but we're here for each other. Look, why don't you folks stop by my house for dinner tonight, we'll order pizza and talk some more." Everyone looked to Harry, who thought it was a great idea.

"Sounds like a plan, where are we going?"

Diego took a piece of paper out of his backpack, he was coming back from a meeting with a professor, and scribbled down some directions for them.

"Figure on 6:00 pm, my roommates should be back by then. Anyway, gotta get to work, I'll see you guys tonight." He shook hands with everyone and was on his way to his job at the campus bookstore.

They took a long lunch, and then saw the rest of the sights, sneaking into the library and a few other locked buildings. It was harder to do than one might think, being 10 of them and all, but they weren't caught, keeping their perfect record intact.

The dinner at Diego's went very well, and the school was moving on up the list in a lot of people's minds. Both of Diego's roommates were magical, and they called some others over too for what about to a five hour bull session, which did include a few interruptions for some playing of the house's Playstation. There was a sampling of graduates of all four schools here, though the state itself was in Salem's territory, and the gang learned a lot about the other three schools in addition to their perhaps future university. Harry didn't bring up his recent issues, and the Virginia based Americans only asked him about his past in broad strokes, focusing more on his picking of Great Lakes and what Hogwarts was really like. A fun time was had by all, and it was nice to know that there was a support system there if that's where they chose.

Flashback to seconds after Harry and the Weasleys left The Leaky Cauldron.

Rufus watched them leave, and then turned back to Dumbledore, who was slowly battering down the nearest anti-Apparition wards with mental magic, just in case he was to be killed 'while trying to escape'. Rufus pulled a chair over and sat down in front of him.

"Now what the hell was so important to tell Harry that you needed to go to these lengths?"

"That is none of your concern Minister." Defiant to the last.

"You are under arrest Albus, and while your alibi might prove to be true, it does not excuse what you did here today. You seem intent on driving that young man away from our society, and you're doing a bang-up job at it to boot."

“You are the one who prefers that Harry be overseas, he’s less a threat to you that way.” The old man honestly felt that way, and was totally unmoved by the reply he got.

“He’s no threat to me either way Albus and any fool would understand that. He doesn’t want power, only the freedom to do what he wants. He wants to be young while he still can, and live that kind of life, free of political and security concerns. The life you were determined to deny him I might remind you. I could appoint him Minister right now and he wouldn’t last the week, it would drive him crazy. No, you’re the threat here, and while you’re in custody, I’ll question you until my heart’s content.” He then pointed to Travis, who came over. They huddled close,, so that no one could hear some of the details.

“Take him away, put him in holding cell Theta and give him the mixture.” Biller immediately whipped his wand out and stunned Dumbledore, and then again for good measure. The old man had been just 10 seconds from dissolving the wards he needed to escape, it was that close.

The mixture was Hermione’s theory proven correct, though she would never know it. It was a cocktail of muggle and magical drugs that Rufus had had Robert Marr cook up, with an eventual eye toward the imprisoning of a Wizard or Witch that was just too powerful to be held by normal methods. Only three magical folk in Great Britain truly fit this description: Voldemort, Dumbledore, and Harry.....though Neville was getting there, not that too many were taking notice of it. The mixture would allow the prisoner to remain conscious to eat, perform bodily functions, and question, but it would sap them of enough of their power that they wouldn’t be a threat to break out of prison. It had never been used beyond the testing phase, so it was about to debut, in the form of a simple hypodermic needle filled with a blue solution.

Holding cell Theta was their most secure cell, and until recently, it had been the home of Royal Gibbon. Gibbon had steadfastly refused any deals with Rufus, convinced that Voldemort could track him down anywhere he tried to hide, so the Death Eater had his knowledge

extracted the hard way. He was now a husk for the most part, and had been worked over so much that he was of no use to anyone, especially Voldemort. Think A Clockwork Orange. He wouldn't be singing in the rain ever again.

Dumbledore was taken away, and the Obliviators came and dealt with the rest of the pub's customers, relieving them of the burden of watching Harry almost get killed. McCrae arrived after all that was done, handing out cigars to celebrate the birth of his third grandson, and was given the truth for the most part, though in exchange for said truth, he was asked to show restraint. He readily agreed, and summoned Alicia to write the story. Harry would not be made available for comment, if for no other reason than that Rufus was somewhat fearful of what he might be willing to say, though he didn't phrase it like that. All the others would be interviewed though, and the twins pretty much said what Harry would have anyway, giving great insight into what they had been thinking, though not how they had arrived at the pub in the first place. At least not the truth of it. It would be front page news the next day, as Dumbledore would still be in custody following his questioning.

The Order members were gone through like the proverbial dose of salts, aside from Moody and Dumbledore, and it was quickly learned that they really did not know much about anything, with regards to the current situation and overall Order business. Dumbledore and Moody were fond of keeping things very close to the vest, just in case someone was captured or otherwise 'detained'. Nothing was gleaned from them that Tonks and Kingsley had not willingly given up while trying to keep their jobs. No decision would be made on their charges until after Dumbledore was dealt with, but it was widely assumed within the DMLE that the days of The Order of the Phoenix were over and done with.

Stephen Dale's story did not change under Veritaserum, but he had recovered a bit of sand, and would not plea bargain down his charges, insisting that he should not be chunked into prison for a panicky accident, or an accidental panic if you will. Even after Travis reminded him that the worst possible thing for his health would be an acquittal, which would quickly be followed by a duel challenge by Harry, it did not dissuade him. Rufus was brought in to try and

change his mind, but to no avail, Dale was more fearful of a life in prison than he was of Harry. The Minister simply shrugged and said theatrically as he left:

“If the young man wishes to commit suicide, far be it from me to stand in his way.”

Dale was still unmoved, and Travis just muttered things about it being Dale's funeral. He was chucked into the new Detention Area, and his trial would not be anytime in the near future.

Moody was a tougher nut to crack, as indeed he was barely cracked at all. One of his paranoid tendencies was to give himself Veritaserum on a daily basis, to the effect that he had built up a very good tolerance to it, being the whole idea. It would be a week before enough of it was leached from his system in order to question him, and his withdrawal was not likely to be a pleasant one. Strictly speaking, the drug was illegal to possess without a Ministry permit, so the ex-Auror was going to be convicted of something before all of this was over and done with.

Dumbledore did not have that kind of chemical imbalance, but it was decided to wait a little bit, and let the mixture do some work before they questioned him. The full Wizengamot was not due to meet for another four days, nor was there an International Confederation or League meeting until the following Saturday, when Dumbledore would have both. That gave Rufus and Travis a grace period that they badly needed. McCrae, after viewing a memory from Remus, was fully on board.

Molly and Arthur took the news rather well, or so the twins decided later. Molly had come to the conclusion that as long as Harry, Fred, and George were together in a fight, nothing serious would happen to any of the three of them. She could not hide a smile either as they told her about Ginny's Bat Bogey antics. Arthur was just looking forward to the downfall of Dumbledore, whom he reasoned had finally crossed the line one time too many, and the Weasley father was finally getting tired of it. He also knew that as Rufus' main man on The Wizengamot, he might be next in line to take over. Arthur had never had any real hopes of political advancement before Rufus

Scrimgeour assumed power, but like Harry, he was realizing that a Minister who shared his goals and methods was not such a bad thing.

Meanwhile, back in Virginia:

It was a bit after midnight as a tired gang gathered in the motel room occupied by Harry, Sophie, Warrick, Reiko, and Hermione.....no friskiness going on mind you. It was time for what Warrick referred to as the 'straw poll'. He was the moderator of the meeting, with Karl Aylesworth as the non-partisan referee. Warrick took the floor:

"Now here's the way that this is going to work: This is a non-binding vote, by secret ballot. Each person is to write one college name, with no debate ahead of time. The only way that this is binding is if the vote is unanimous. If it isn't, then we reconvene on the last Sunday of the month for the final vote, which will have a long a debate as necessary. Right now though, we just want a sense of the room. Hermione's vote is going to be cast by Harry in the final one, given the financial considerations he's paying, but she will be allowed full debate, and a full vote in the straw poll. Any questions?"

No one seemed to have any, and so he passed around eight slips of paper and eight pens. Everyone quickly scribbled down a name on their papers, folded them, and passed them over to Warrick. He then turned to Karl

"Since this is secret, and I know everyone's handwriting, would you do the honors Karl?" Warrick always read Hermione's letters, so that's how he knew hers.

"Sure thing." Karl took the slips, shuffled them a bit, and read out the names.

"South Florida.":

"UCLA"

"North Carolina."

“North Carolina.”

“Hawaii.”

“San Diego State.”

“Virginia.”

“Virginia.”

“Virginia.”

“By my tally, every school got at least one vote, with Virginia getting three and North Carolina two. We couldn’t have gotten much further away from unanimity.” Only that third vote for Virginia made that so.

“Thanks Karl. Now we don’t need to talk about this tonight, and it would be nice if there was no outright lobbying, outside of couples talking about this amongst themselves. Jonas, Claudia, consider yourself a couple in this one instance, and feel free to lobby Harry all you want Hermione. Ginny, if you’re going to come with us next year, you can come and debate, but of course you won’t get a vote.” Drew was just shaking his head.

“You know, I thought my mom was the politician. That was pretty impressive Warrick.”

“She did offer me a summer job, helping out on the campaign.” That was at Christmas in Colorado, and Warrick had taken her up on it immediately.

“After you practically begged her to.”

“Details Reiko, details. And I did not beg, I merely suggested that I could be of help.”:

Hermione and Ginny soon left, much to their regret, though the train was leaving for Hogwarts in just a few hours. Hermione had blown off

over a week of NEWT studying for this excursion, and poor Ron would be suffering the most as she tried to make up for it. His protests that he had kept up with the schedule that she had made up for him fell on deaf ears. Ginny had no time for a talk with her parents, them being sound asleep when she got home, and Ron of course was around as they made their way to the train. She would get her copy of the paper every day with some trepidation, expecting a Dumbledore obituary on the front page, but nothing happened, and in time she thought less and less about it.

Harry and Sophie went for a walk before going to bed, it was their first time alone all day. Sophie's question was a bit surprising, given what had happened earlier.

"So what did you vote for?"

Harry was a bit nonplussed, expecting a grilling, but then he started laughing.

"I voted for UCLA, but I could handle Virginia very easily. What about you?"

"I was the Hawaii vote. Something tells me that we're not going to get our ways."

"At least it'll prove to people that I don't get everything I want around here. We know that Claudia voted for South Florida, and Drew for Virginia." He was glad about not getting his way too, though he could floo to Disneyland if he wanted to.

"I bet Marie was San Diego State."

"Jonas was North Carolina, and maybe Hermione, she seemed to dig it there."

"That would leave Warrick and Reiko as the other Virginias."

Flip flop Marie and Hermione, and they had it right, not that they would ever know. Sophie and Harry had deliberately avoided this

topic before, wanting the other to come to their own conclusions independently. Sophie walked in silence before querying him.

“What was your second choice?”

“Probably here, though the allure of being the only magicals at North Carolina is a big, big draw for me. You?”

“The same, though I would put North Carolina ahead of Virginia. This is getting real.”

“I know, just nine more months and we’ll be living in one of those places, free to do whatever we want.” Harry had a calendar in the trunk, and he was marking off the days before graduation with a big X.

“That’ll be nice.” There was something in her voice.

“I’m fine Sophie, everything is under control.”

“I know you are Harry.” This was going too easy, but he wasn’t complaining.

“Now we just have to convince the others.”

“Karl was pretty horrified. I haven’t seen him that way since we set fire to the kitchen at Tecumseh when we were 12.” It was Sophie and Reiko’s version of ‘The Noodle Incident’ from Calvin and Hobbes, a much rumored story whose few given out details never really made sense to anyone else.

“He did not take it well, no, but I’m not worried about that. I’m not worried about anything really, Rufus will handle everything just fine.” If Harry had faith in the ability of anyone in Britain, it was Rufus and Travis.

“I know he will, but one day Dumbledore is going to go too far Harry.”

Harry then decided to dip his toe into dangerous waters.

“One of the twins suggested that we go take him out, do a preemptive strike.” He declined to say which twin.

“Maybe you should.” That reaction nearly gave Harry a stroke, and he actually coughed a few times before answering.

“Come again?”

“It is lovely when I surprise you like that, though I wasn’t going for that reaction. You’ve said yourself that you can’t fight them both, Dumbledore and Voldemort. It seems that Voldemort is going to wait until you graduate, maybe you should secure your rear flank before that happens.”

“I honestly don’t know what to say here.”

“I hope you don’t do it Harry, but I won’t object if you do. I know you’re probably worried about our reactions if you were to do anything hardcore like that, but you shouldn’t. Your life comes first, and we’ll love you no matter what.”

“I’m not going to do it, Rufus will sort him out.” The relief in his voice was palpable, that she was not judging him at all.

“I’m glad it’s him as Minister for something like this, rather than that Fudge guy.”

“I wonder about that though, Fudge seems to easy to manipulate, he could be Klink and I could be Col. Hogan.” From the old television series Hogan’s Heroes, where the American prisoner Hogan more or less ran German Kommandant Klink. Of course that was largely due to the actor playing Klink making it part of his contract that his character lose in every show, but Harry didn’t know that.

“That’s reaching a bit you know, better to have someone competent watching your back.” She did like the show though, tapes of which were popular in the Cortez Lounge.

“I just want all of that to be over, part of me wants to call out Voldemort right now and get it over with.” But he didn’t really, he knew that every day that this was delayed, his magic would grow that much stronger. That was enough to stop him.

The fallout the next day in Britain was serious, but not catastrophic. The Daily Prophet had no lurid pictures to show of the incident, but that didn’t stop four articles from being written about it. Alicia’s byline was at the top of the front page, as she detailed the attempted kidnapping moment by moment, with many quotes from her fellow Weasleys. In all fairness to Dumbledore though, she did report his supposed alibi. That’s what she called it in the story, the ‘supposed alibi.’ The use of Avada Kedavra by Stephen Dale was given relatively little play, just mentioned in one of the articles, though it was heavy on hints that the old man had ordered it as a last resort. It was also announced in the paper that The Order of the Phoenix was being officially outlawed, and that all members should sign an affidavit immediately forswearing any allegiance to Dumbledore or Moody.

The public’s reaction was one of outrage, though Harry was not totally the hero as far as they were concerned. About 2/3 of the letters to the paper were in support of him, the rest supporting Dumbledore, saying that of course he knew best. The rub was, the Dumbledore supporters were vociferous in their support, while Harry’s simply agreed that he had been prodded one time too many, and had every right to snap. But it was not as strong as Harry would perhaps have liked, even if the majority was on his side. The Prophet did not make that distinction in it’s editorials though, as Dumbledore’s head on a plate was called for, and The Order attacked as a vigilante group of hellions, bent on Ministry overthrow. The thing was, that’s what it had been turning into, as future events would demonstrate.

Joanne Murray, through contacts at the American Auror Command, always found out the lead stories of The Daily Prophet before the paper made it’s way to America, which was usually a day later than

publication. This was a somewhat recent habit, dating back to a certain day in August of 1996 when she had voluntarily taken on Harry and his attendant issues. She heard her old friend, over the phone, describe the goings on, and fully sympathized with her student. Like Karl Aylesworth though, she worried about the long-term damage. She fully expected a visit from Harry, and prepared to listen to a rant about Dumbledore and all his failings. It's not that she minded really though, he always came up with some good one-liners.

But she didn't get her expectation fulfilled. Harry did come by, but only to give her an update on the university tour. He never mentioned Dumbledore, or his meeting with McCrae the week before. Nor did Joanne herself bring anything up, feeling that it was perhaps not her place, though in fact Harry wouldn't have minded. She noticed that Harry seemed rather tired looking, but she mostly chalked that up to being on the go since Christmas Day, walking around campuses and the like. But Joanne was still a little worried, and sought out Sophie later on in the day.

"Is he okay? He seems a bit worn."

"He's fine ma'am, he just has a lot on his plate right now."

"Worries about Dumbledore?"

"I think he's tired of that particular drama." Everyone connected to Harry was tired of it, truth be told, but they all knew that it wasn't Harry's fault. For the most part.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"I will ma'am, thank you."

The first Hogwarts trunk was tested out that night, though Harry's very strident rule was that only Hogwarts people were to use it. He meant that no Great Lakes personnel were to be caught in Hogwarts castle, if something like that were to happen. Ginny's roommates, whom she got along with for the most part, could not be counted on to keep any kind of secrets, let alone something this big. Graduation

Day at Hogwarts had been shifted to the last Sunday in June, due to security requirements, they could all get a tour of the castle then. Otherwise the trunks were for the DOM's, and only the DOM's, to come to Great Lakes, not the other way round.

Jonas had no interest in seeing the castle, only interest in spending time with Ginny. He also had no problem with it being public time, and Claudia and Reiko were amazed that he was being so gentlemanly about the whole thing. This was a side of him that they had not really seen in a few years, and it was a welcome one. As mentioned before, Jonas was the furthest thing from a cad really, but watching him try to settle down with a girl that really 'liked' was something to see.

The twins just pooh poohed it of course, saying it was the greatness of being a Weasley.....until reminded by all the American women that Ron was the exception, none of them particularly digging him in that way.

"He was adopted, Mum just happened to pick out a baby with red hair." Just a joke of course, as Ron pretty fairly resembled Charlie, at least physically. Jonas would just tell the Americans later that he had had enough booty calls to last him awhile, and he wanted to see if something long-term could be worked out with Ginny. If he wasn't going to get any from her.....well he could live with that, or so he claimed. The party that night was a lot fun, and a nice merging of the two groups.

Classes started the next day, and Harry was able to put Dumbledore out of his mind for the next little while.

Little, meaning until Friday.

Friday, January 10, 1998

Ministry of Magic, Great Britain

11:00 am GMT

Dumbledore had been held in protective custody all week, missing the Wizengamot meeting on Wednesday that officially removed him

as Head. The body had voted 30-9 that, despite a lack of confession or conviction, the charges alone were serious enough to warrant such a measure. The only abstention had been Dumbledore himself, who was barely awake enough to perform basic bodily functions, let alone get involved in a political debate. No new Head had been chosen yet, that would wait until after Dumbledore's situation was officially sorted out.

Travis and Rufus would both do the questioning, with Bones there as a witness, and as a restraint if necessary. The only other person in the room was Patrick Cleburne, the Head Unspeakable, who had known Dumbledore longer than anyone currently working in The Ministry. He would stand behind his old colleague, his wand at the back of Dumbledore's head, just in case. Travis administered the Veritaserum, and they waited for it to take effect. Rufus led off the questioning.

"Do you know where you are?"

"In prison, I would imagine." Dumbledore was with it more than he had any right to be, but one could still hear the weakness in his voice, the mixture was working far better than they had hoped.

"Why are you in prison?"

"Because Harry demanded it of you." He firmly believed that, and The Head Auror was happy to contradict him.

"Not so Albus, Harry has made no demands about you one way or the other."

"Liar." That response was shrugged off.

"If Harry Potter had tried to force his way past you to leave the Leaky Cauldron on 4 January, would you have physically or magically stopped him?"

"No."

Travis paused for a moment, but all that did was bring a smile to Dumbledore's face. He liked surprising these people, and mixture or not, he was feeling a little better after seeing this. Travis took note of this, a note that would not be to the old man's benefit later on, and plowed on with his questions.

"Why did you want to talk with him?"

"I wanted his support in coming election, and I wanted to talk to him about the men you really are."

There it was, and none of the four Ministry people in the room would have believed it if it hadn't been said under the influence of drugs.

"What on earth made you think that Harry Potter would come out in support of you in anything, let alone the election.

"Because I'm not on Voldemort's side and you two are.":

"Who is 'you two', exactly?"

"Travis Biller and Rufus Scrimgeour."

"You really believe that The Minister and I are in cahoots with Voldemort?"

"Yes."

"You do not acknowledge the premise that if Voldemort were to take over tomorrow, the two of us and Madam Bones would be the first three people liquidated?"

"Of course I do, your purpose for him would have been served, and he would no longer need your services. He would not want to leave any loose ends" Very true, however erroneous it was otherwise.

"Is Madam Bones in cahoots with Voldemort as well."

“I do not know one way or another?”

Bones did not appreciate that, but said nothing for the time being, as Travis continued.

“How do you know that The Minister and I are?”

This is where Dumbledore began fighting the drugs, he had known something was wrong with his body before this, though he had always been stunned before they injected the mixture.....so he had been husbanding his strength for this series of moments.

To no avail, as the Veritaserum eventually forced the information from him. If only he hadn't been weakened, this conversation might have gone a lot differently.

“I have been in correspondence with Dmitri Flint, he sent me bank records and other documents, showing a series of payoffs.” Dmitri was Marcus Flint's father. A Slytherin alumnus, he ran off-shore banks in The Azore Islands, and did various money laundering tasks for underworld figures, magical and muggle. He was not on Voldemort's side, per se, especially after the bad man was willing to sacrifice his son, but he was no great fan of Rufus. Rufus, as Head Auror, had been partially responsible for Flint hightailing it out of magical Britain.

“And it never occurred to you that he might be playing you? Or that Voldemort might be playing him?”

“Of course, but he submitted to Veritaserum questioning by Alastor Moody, and he confirmed it.”

Boom.

Bones was looking at Rufus and Travis a bit differently now, while Cleburne just rolled his eyes and made his first direct sally into our tiny story.

“Are you aware that memories and truths can be planted inside someone’s head by a skilled Legilimens?” He didn’t believe a word of this crap.

“I am.”

“Then why do you not see the likelihood that Voldemort did such a thing with Flint?” Cleburne and Dmitri’s father had been roommates at Hogwarts, and if the son was as morally weak as his father had been.....

“It does not fit the overall facts of the scenario.” In other words, Dumbledore disbelieved that theory because it did not fit the conclusion he wanted. Belief and truth are often confused within the mind, so the drugs let it pass.

“And you thought that this would convince Harry?”

“I thought that he should have access to all of the information before he came out publicly. I’m sure you all know by now that I am running against The Minister.”

Rufus, who had been denying all of this to Bones in a series of whispers, now took over.

“I would not be so sure about you running for office you know, our laws do not allow prisoners to stand for election.”

“I have done nothing wrong.” Rufus begged to differ.

“You’ve goaded that young man a time too many. The knowledge that a 17 year old man put you flat on your back with one spell would not do you too many favors with the general public. Your appeal Dumbledore, such as it is, is based on your power and integrity, both of which have deserted you lately when dealing with Harry.”

“Says you, a traitor.”

“Only a traitor to you Dumbledore, and I never once swore you any kind of allegiance.”

“When the truth comes out, you’ll be finished.”

“No Albus, you’ve got it all backward as usual. Where are these documents?”

“I don’t know, Alastor hid them.”

The toxicologist from St. Mungo’s had estimated that it would be another three days before they could be sure that Moody was ‘dry’. His body was not doing well at present, so it was possible that it would be a little longer. Moody was not a young man after all, and life had not treated him very well at times.

“Did you meet with Flint yourself?”

“No, he would not meet with me, only with my representative.” There was a shocker. To most on the Dark side or its fringes, being caught meeting with Dumbledore would mean an instant death sentence.

The rest of the session yielded relatively little, other than that Dumbledore was planning to violate the American restraining order and seek Harry out at Great Lakes if necessary. Cleburne stunned Dumbledore, and then gave him another dose of the mixture, before tuning into the uncomfortable conversation taking place with the others. Rufus was at his charismatic best with Bones, trying to convince her that Dumbledore was full of shit.

“Amelia, you know that what he is saying is complete bollocks.”

“I agree, but you both need to do a Veritserum test you like you had him do after Draco’s kidnapping. That’s the only way the public will believe it. It’s the only way Harry and his faction will believe it. “ And yes, she too wanted the reassurance.

“Done, we’ll do it at the League meeting tomorrow, he has to be here anyway. You do the questioning Amelia, we know we can trust you.” He was surprised that that’s all they had to do, and was more than willing.

This was all Bones could have asked of her two colleagues, and went a long way toward settling any qualms she might have. Not that she had many, she knew first hand how hard Travis was on captured Death Eaters, and he was such good friends with Harry.....she figured that the lad would have put Veritaserum in his drink at least once, as paranoid as Harry was.

He hadn’t, but Harry was satisfied that Rufus and Travis were on his side. At least he had been before this, who knows now.

Saturday, January 11, 1998

Noon GMT

The Leady Cauldron, private conference area

The buzz in the room had not died down very much, even after Rufus laid out just what Dumbledore was being accused of, what Dumbledore himself was accusing Rufus and Travis of, and all the other ancillary issues. The old man still had some support in the room, and The Minister was looked at with suspicion by some of the older members of the League, but he was not interrupted as he spoke.

“Now Travis and I both are fully willing to have Madam Bones question us, under Veritaserum, to prove that we are loyal to the sitting government, and firm enemies of that fool Voldemort. This is not going to be a fishing expedition mind you, but a quick and definitive test. Charles, if you will.”

Hogwarts Potions Master Charles Shepherd, a newly minted member of the League, came to Rufus’ place at the table. He produced a small vial and gave the drops to Travis first. Bones waited for the drug to take effect, and then asked three simple questions.

“Are you now, or have you ever been, allied with the man who calls himself Lord Voldemort?”

“No I have not been, nor am I now.”

“Is Minister Scrimgeour or any other Ministry official allied with Voldemort to your knowledge?”

“No.”

“Who is your allegiance to?”

“Minister Scrimgeour, the Ministry of Magic, and Harry Potter.” Probably in that order, though Travis was smiling as he said it.

A bit of a buzz increase after that one, and Harry, sitting between the twins, was a little embarrassed. He didn't say anything, just figuring it was an acknowledgement by Travis that he was the one to fight the final battle. Bones didn't bother to hide her smile, as she turned to the assembled members.

“Thank you Travis, I know that I for one am satisfied. Are there any objections to moving on to The Minister?”

No one had any, all suspicions had been allayed as far as the group was concerned, while Harry and the Weasleys just sighed mentally, very grateful sighs as that. They had not hitched their wagons to the wrong horses. There were other questions, a bit more specific in nature, that some of the members might have wanted to ask, but Cleburne was there specifically to prevent any fishing.

Rufus answered the questions correctly as well, and only afterward did our old friend Lance LeGault bring up a very relevant query.

“How do we know that that stuff is really Veritaserum? Aren't we just taking that young pup's word for it?” Someone had to play devil's advocate, and LeGault was always willing it seemed.

Shepherd supposed that he couldn't blame him for asking, but his reply was very Shepherd-like.

"Are you, whomever you are, volunteering to be our control subject? I love it when students volunteer, it shows that they know what they're talking about." McGonagall, Shepherd's usual target, was delighted to see the shoe on someone else's foot for a change, and Remus had his hand over his mouth to quiet his chuckling. In many ways it was the kind of thing Snape might say, except that Shepherd said pretty much everything with a kind of bemused friendliness. Especially his put downs.

LeGault was trapped, and everyone in the room knew it. He nodded and Shepherd came over and administered the drug to him, and did the interrogation to boot. After several embarrassing questions about LeGault's first divorce, even he was satisfied that no drags were being run on anyone. The retired Auror took his medicine like a man though, and gave no outward complaint. Shepherd finished up and gave everyone his best absent minded smile.

"Thank you Mr. LeGault. Minister?"

"And thanks to you Charles. Now we must decide who is to be the new Head of the League. By custom that is usually the Head of the Wizengamot, but I would like to split the two duties, especially given that we don't have a Wizengamot Head as of yet. Any nominations?"

No one said anything at first, but eventually most of the Auror leadership was nominated, as well as many retired personnel, and even Harry himself, who respectfully declined. It wound up being a two person 'race' between retired Aurors Judy Posthumus and John Horlan. Both of them would have the time to devote to it, not having full-time jobs to worry about, Posthumus had retired in 1995, three years after Horlan. Posthumus won the vote by a narrow margin, and immediately appointed Horlan as her Deputy. She promised a smooth transition, and no undue responsibilities added to most peoples' workloads. She had always been an advocate of the retired members of the League taking more tasks on, but Dumbledore was unwilling to

have the League do much of anything if he could help it. He had viewed it more as a public relations ploy than anything.

The voting process and aftermath took enough time that little else got done in the meeting. Voldemort had been very quiet over the last few weeks, for reasons unknown, so very little attention was paid to him. Procedural matters took the remaining time, as Posthumus wanted to nail certain details down that her predecessor had preferred to leave hanging. After the meeting, Rufus gathered Remus, Harry, and the Weasleys aside for a little chat.

“Harry, what do you want to do about pressing charges against Dumbledore?” He held his breath just a touch, fearing the worst.....the worst being a demand to have the book thrown at Dumbledore, alibi be damned.

The reply was surprising, but one that was well thought out. Harry had gotten the transcript from the two rounds of questions and had gone over them pretty thoroughly.

“I should have called his bluff, I was probably just as much in the wrong as he was. Maybe I was too eager for a fight between us, not that I would ever admit that to him. Don’t charge him, but get him kicked off the Wizengamot.”

Arthur was looking at Harry with a new respect, the respect that one has for a young person making a mature decision, one devoid of selfishness. The twins and Bill just assumed that breaking Dumbledore’s jaw had gotten the revenge desire out of his system for the time being. All the Weasley men were right to a degree, as Harry looked relieved that they were relieved. Rufus just thanked heaven for small favors, and ploughed on before Harry could change his mind.

“Any message you want sent to him?”

“No thank you sir, I believe that my Repulsar message did the trick on that score. What about these documents that Dumbledore talked about?”

“We’re not sure yet, Moody has taken a turn for the worse, it seems that his health was failing even before we arrested him. He’s in St. Mungos now, and it will be some time before we can question him, even gentle questioning. We sent a team in after Flint, but he has gone to ground. He must have read the press coverage and assumed that we would be after him next. No, we just have to wait.”

“For the record, I never once thought that you were on the wrong side of all this. You’ve had too many opportunities to harm me over the last year, and too many times you’ve helped me instead.”

“I appreciate that Harry, I know that trusting people comes hard to you nowadays, especially government people. I’m glad that I’ve earned it.” Now he was just making sure that Harry was still on the Rufus team, and was rewarded when the lad just smiled and moved on to the next order of business.

“The filing deadline is next Wednesday, what will Dumbledore do then?”

“He’ll file in all probability, since we’re going to release him on Tuesday, just in time. No Harry, this is where we finish him once and for all as a political force in our little world here. He needs that last failure to get it to sink into that stubborn head of his. He crossed the line, believing in trumped up charges against Travis and myself.”

“You know, if I had just pushed past him, he might have gone so far as to commit treason.” Harry felt that this would not really be a good thing, and Rufus agreed with him.

“It’s just as well that you didn’t. It gave him a different kind of comeuppance, and even I don’t want Dumbledore put on trial for treason. No, that would be just too much for our people to handle right now.”

“I know, and I’m glad that it hasn’t come to that.”

“Speaking of trials, Stephen Dale still won’t plea bargain. His trial is set for mid-February, and I’m afraid I’m going to need you to put in an

appearance. We'll schedule it for first thing in the morning, so all you will lose is some sleep, no class."

"What have you offered him?"

"We won't go any lower than five years, and that's with no Dementors to boot, that's like three months in Azkaban, the equivalent anyway. He is adamant though, and will not agree to anything over time served."

"Is he that deranged?" It sure sounded like it.

"Maybe, but his story is that you were threatening him and that he was justified."

"Will the Wizengamot buy that?"

"Of course not, since you used nothing close to Dark, or anything that was life threatening. You were trying to knock him out, and all the other Order members, or former members as the case is, will testify to that end." If they knew what was good for them they would be, that was part of their plea bargain.

"What's happening to them?"

"Thousand galleon fines for all of them, aside from Moody and Dale. Moody has suffered enough to be frank with you, and the fines will go to St. Mungo's, and contribute to their fine work."

Our boy was satisfied with that, though he was irritated at the thought of being dragged over for another trial.

"If he gets acquitted, I'm going to formally challenge him to a duel." He thought that the five year prison term thing was a little generous too, since the standard sentence was 10-15 years for an attempt that did not work. A kill by Avada Kedavra, that could not be self defense justified, generated a life sentence. Besides, Harry had done some discreet checking, through Jennifer Tyson in the Records Department, and Stephen Dale had gotten an A on his Defense Against the Dark

Arts NEWT, Dumbledore must have needed numbers or something to think that he was worth recruiting.

“Travis said the very thing to him, but he says, under the drugs, that he’ll merely decline. He’s a cocky little bastard, he has an answer for everything. He’s not Dark sympathetic or anything, and we did fire him as well.” All of them were shaking their heads at the folly of bucking that much evidence, but there was nothing else to do. Rufus then changed the subject, thankful that Harry had not demanded immediate access to Dale’s cell.....access that The Minister would be sorely inclined to give him. He knew that if the shoe was on the other foot, he would demand it of Harry.

“So Harry, since you know Voldemort better than any of us, is he celebrating right now?”

Harry had thought about this quite a bit over the last week, but still hadn’t quite figured it out.

“I think he’s probably conflicted a bit. Dumbledore’s been part of his life for so long, but now that he’s in the wind? Free of a government job? I don’t know what the guy’s thinking.”

In point of fact Voldemort had gotten a nice laugh out of it, but not much else. He had more or less dismissed Dumbledore as any kind of enemy once the Hogwarts assassination project had mostly failed. In fact he sent a communication to Borgin, instructing him not to enter the race for Minister if Dumbledore filed. He wanted Scrimgeour and Dumbledore to go picnicking on each other, the bad man felt that he could use some amusement.

Besides, he had other plans to occupy him at the moment.

Harry sat with them a little more, and then somehow persuaded Rufus to have Rob Graham do something else while he ‘portkeyed’ home. Instead, he and the gang, and the twins later on, spent the afternoon at Godric’s Hollow. He puttered around his house for a bit, noticing changes that had been made, and he stood for awhile in his

front yard. He found it so odd that his time in this house was so peaceful, yet in the rest of magical Britain it was so stressful.

The following Monday Arthur Weasley was appointed as the new Head of the Wizengamot. It was by acclimation, despite the fact that there were over 15 members of the body that were senior to him. It was widely known about his integrity, honesty, and even his management ability, The Muggle Affairs office had never been run so efficiently.....and the Head job for the Wizengamot really was more management than leadership. Dumbledore's supporters, and there were still some left on the body, all agreed that Arthur was a better choice than some slavishly pro-Rufus hack that the Minister could just appoint. Arthur was now next in line to be Minister, if something should happen to Rufus, though the Weasley patriarch had told Bones that he would insist that she take on the position if it came to it. Bones, a slight bit apprehensive of a Travis Biller led government, quietly agreed to do it this time, if it came to it. The Head of the Wizengamot, as Dumbledore had proved over the years, was not a full time position, so Arthur retained his post in Muggle Affairs. He just had a few more staffers is all, and now Ron would for sure have a job waiting for him if Quidditch didn't call.

Dumbledore was not, however, removed from the body of the Wizengamot itself, much to Harry's and Rufus' irritation. He was merely suspended for a period of six months, and put on probation. If he kept his nose clean, or so the bill read, then he could get his spot back. Just how much dirt he was allowed on his nose was a matter for individual interpretation of the members, but Rufus could take heart that they had suspended the old man, suspensions or expulsions were very rare in these matters. Until then, The Wizengamot would run with 39 members. The vote had been made before Arthur had been appointed as Head, so it was not seen as a weakness of leadership on his part. Indeed many privately viewed Arthur's appointment as a bit of afterwards guilt on the part of some of the members, having so slightly thwarted The Minister's desires.

Dumbledore himself had no public comment upon being released from Ministry custody. Rather his first priority was to visit Moody in the hospital, and he blithely ignored the Daily Prophet reporter assigned to detail his every public move. Moody was slowly on the

road to recovery, though he was still technically under arrest. Dumbledore sent a brief thank you note to Harry, for not pressing charges, and while Harry studied the three sentence missive until he was blue in the face, he could not tell if it was sincere or sarcastic. Since he couldn't, he just forwarded a copy to Travis and declined to respond to it. Dumbledore was still a member of The League, and they would see each other in February, which Harry was sure would lead to no good, but there was nothing else to do but grit his teeth and get on with it.

Friday, January 17, 1998

8:30 am

The Dining Hall

Murray quickly finished her scrambled eggs and stood up to make an announcement. Most of the crowd assumed it would be about the next Flackter trip, which was due in a couple of weeks or so, but they were mistaken.

“If I can have everyone’s attention! Thank you. As you are all aware, the four schools in our system have been conducting drills on school defense this year. Each school is to attack one other, with the same schools reciprocating. You will remember well our sound defeat of Salem back in October, thanks to the Senior Year Basic Combat students. I received word this morning that Tecumseh was successfully attacked by Pathfinder last night, just before midnight.” A decidedly sloppy victory as it happened, though she had been given relatively few details. She let the room buzz about that a little bit before she continued. A look at the gang’s table saw Harry and Drew immediately whispering to one another, each of them immediately cottoning on to what this all meant. Joanne would explain it now to the rest of the school.

“Given the rules of the competition, that means that Great Lakes will be on the receiving end of an attack by Tecumseh, with Salem assaulting Pathfinder. Now all we know is that at least six weeks have to pass before the next assault, so we have at minimum until the end

of next month to make our plans. Anyone who wishes to submit an idea, please see one of the students involved. Would you all please stand.” The eleven members of Ripley’s class all stood up, five of them being at one table already. The teachers at each school were encouraged to let the students do the bulk of the planning each way, something that Ripley had allowed, and won, while the teachers at the other schools had been much more hands on. Of course Ripley had that luxury, with Harry and Drew in charge of things.

Murray sat back down, and conversation turned to more mundane things. The next day, Harry, Drew, and Reiko would risk a trip to Tecumseh itself, and get an after action report from Steve Atwood, visiting with them in Aylesworth Corner. He told them that Pathfinder had gone underground, where there were no wards to speak of, and had tunneled their way into the basement. Once there, they simply stormed the faculty floor and quickly took Headmaster Robert Clary prisoner. The Professors Aylesworth were not involved in the defense planning of course, and were secretly pleased that Burke and Hill had botched the job so spectacularly. And they said so right in front of Steve.

“Don’t worry sir, ma’am. What’s said here stays here.” He didn’t like the two Defense guys either, one reason he was being so helpful. Steve always rationalized to himself that he never picked Tecumseh, it had picked him, since he was living in a foster home in Metairie, Louisiana when he had gotten his Tecumseh letter. That philosophy, and all the money he was making from WWW, did most of the legwork.

He answered some more questions about his surveillance, again acknowledged that he didn’t have to be doing any of this, and promised that he would let them know as soon as the clock started ticking on the attack. The clock starting was not something that would be announced to the entire school, but Atwood’s Sponges would have no trouble finding it out. The attacks could come anytime within the two weeks though, so a properly prepared school could attack that very night. Great Lakes, going first, had taken the entire two weeks to refine their plan.

That last part about the clock got Harry to thinking, and he quickly excused himself and flooded over to Raymond Parker's office at Salem. Parker was doing some paperwork fortunately, and didn't have to be summoned from home, though his kids would have loved to have met Harry.

"What's up Harry?"

"When the two week clock starts ticking for your Pathfinder adventure, would you let me know?" Just in case Salem was the next school to attack, rather than Tecumseh.

Parker paused for a moment, and then started laughing.

"Not a problem. Any tips on how to defeat those mountains?"

"Only an aerial assault, which I'm assuming they have covered. I've never been out there before, so I don't really know." He then described Pathfinder's strategy on Tecumseh, and Parker was nodding right along with him.

"Nice, very nice. Did you guys ever consider going underground on us?"

"Yeah, but we just figured that you would have the basement rigged, so we didn't consider it for too long. At least we know where Tecumseh will be thinking about now, Hill and Burke aren't too imaginative from what I've been hearing."

"From your inside man, that'll be your other alarm clock."

"It's hard being a business mogul sometimes, but I take the benefits I can get from it." They shared a laugh, and Harry was soon back on his way to Tecumseh, then back to Great Lakes so that he could bury his brain in NEWT studying.

Yep, it was that time of year. With all his political goings on to deal with, Harry still had NEWT's coming up. He and the rest of the gang were on a set schedule, and studied at predetermined times.

Homework was practically non-existent in their classes now, with NEWT revision taking up most of the lecture time, and all of the homework time. Even Ray Kinsella in Wandless Magic was forgoing the homework assignments, knowing the strain that his students were going through, even though there was no NEWT in his subject. Harry and Sophie did History of Magic instead, while Reiko chose Astronomy, and Drew Muggle Studies.

Quidditch was still shut down, Quodpot as well, though the workout room in the basement was usually full with some athletes partaking, depending on their club schedules. Speaking of clubs, Harry finally won a Wizard's Chess match against his young friend Nan Mahon, after well over a year of trying, even if he still couldn't get close to beating Drew. The three of them were usually joined by the new WWW supervisor Rachel Kessler, and sometimes played tandem games, with Harry and Rachel against Drew and Nan. Harry couldn't beat Rachel either, except in regular chess, but the four of them had some fun games, and Harry felt that it was a very pleasant way to while away an evening a week. That and his twice weekly workouts were his main diversions from gang related activities, and even then he worked out with Warrick and Reiko, and played chess with Drew. Still, he couldn't help but reflect that he had a lot more social choices than he had at Hogwarts most of the time. The trunk circle was not going to get any larger, but he enjoyed his casual friendships with Nan, Rachel, and the young ones Marty, Keisha, and Anna.

That was something he had mostly gotten away from in the last few months: Comparing Hogwarts to Great Lakes, but it still reared it's head occasionally. The McCrae lunch had gotten him back in the habit a little bit, and now he found himself having to wean it off.

On the penultimate Friday of the month, Moody finally regained his faculties and was able to be questioned. He had lost a lot of weight during his hospitalization, and even a little of his fire as well. The papers that allegedly proved that Rufus and Travis were in cahoots with the Death Eaters were in his Gringott's vault. He gave up the location of the key without being drugged to do it, after hearing about the Veritaserum questioning done by Bones at the last League meeting. He refused to condemn Dumbledore, saying that every straw needed to be grasped at.....but likewise he declined to praise

his former boss as well. He agreed, perhaps a bit too easily, to forsake the now outlawed Order of the Phoenix, saying that the detention bluff of Harry had indeed gone too far. He sounded sincere in that, and it was confirmed with drugs a few days later. He would remain in the hospital for a few more weeks though, recovering his strength. Dumbledore was a frequent visitor, but the Ventriloquist Sponge hidden under Moody's bed picked up no useful intelligence.

It turned out that one of the kitchen people in The Leaky Cauldron was on the payroll of the former Order, and he was instructed to inform Dumbledore or Moody of any interesting guests that happened by. The only reason that the confrontation had not taken place during the McCrae talk was that Dumbledore had been out of the country on personal business, and could not get back in time to interfere with the hour long chat Harry had had with the publisher. Tom refused to sack the dishwasher, as it was his nephew, but the man was scared blind by Travis' threats and was told to go forth and sin no more. He had not actually committed a crime, so the demand that he be fired was only to soften him up for what Travis really wanted. He did not, however, ask for similar favors, as the DMLE had people stationed on both sides of the pub, the muggle side and the magical side. No need for inside people then.

Sunday, January 25, 1998

8:00 pm GMT

The Hollow

The college selection meeting was to be held in the friendly confines of the living room at Godric's Hollow. With all the people involved it probably would have been a cramped meeting in one of the trunks, and since the large house was just one or two floo trips away, it was thought that this would be best.

The crowd would be rather large, as more and more people decided that they needed some entertainment for their Sunday afternoon/evening pleasures. Nick and Karen had taken their first trips through the trunk floo, via Tecumseh, where they were joined by Karl and Lisa, who were supposedly in Tulsa for the afternoon.

Michael Steele was there as well, meaning that all five American parental units who knew about the trunk system were present, none of whom had ever been to The Hollow before, and they got the grand tour before the festivities started. The Hogwarts DOM's were all there, wanting some time away from the castle, with Ron and Hermione in particular wondering where they would end up. They had both agreed, after a long talk, that it would take something totally extraordinary in order to get them to stay in Britain, other than Ron going back to play Quidditch via the trunk floo. Ron and Lee, despite committing to live in the new house, had not argued for a vote, seeing this more as an educational decision rather than a lifestyle one. But they and Ginny would all be very interested in the outcome. Pizza and drinks were served to everyone, and things got underway.

Warrick took control of the meeting as he had before, and conjured up a gavel to bang on the nearest coffee table.

“All right then, let's get this going. First thing that we're going to do is take another straw poll of sorts. We're going to vote publicly, to see where we are. Any school that gets no votes in the straw poll is eliminated right off the bat. Then we debate. After each person has their say, we vote again. It has been agreed ahead of time that a school needs six votes of the nine to get picked, and we'll stay here until that happens. Any objections?” The parents, having only seen the gang argue at mealtimes, leaned forward in anticipation.

“Good. I'll go first, and my vote is for Virginia. Reiko?”:

“Virginia.” And on around the room.

“UCLA.” Sophie.

“Hermione and I vote for UCLA.” Harry, though he had told Hermione ahead of time, and she was fine with it, the lure of Disneyland and all that.

“Virginia.” Marie

“Virginia.” Drew, meaning that the three couple all voted the same, to no one’s great surprise.

“South Florida.” Claudia

“North Carolina.” Jonas

A few votes had changed since then, including Marie’s and Sophie’s, as some tacit lobbying had been done. Hermione still favored the West Coast, and was a little disappointed that San Diego State had gained no votes.

“Okay then, San Diego State is eliminated, though it was a lovely campus, and so is Hawaii, proving that just because a school appears to be the front-runner, it doesn’t mean much in the end. Maybe we should have done a points system or something. Drew, did you ever find out about the ghost that supposedly lived at San Diego State?” At the Zoo dorm.

“Total fabrication, according to our records. The nearest ghost is at UC-San Diego, and that’s not the same school. Mom said nice try though.” The parents Baylor knew about the college tour and decision making process, but they were not in on the secret of the trunk floo, so they were not present at this meeting. The only government official in any country that knew about it was Arthur, and that’s the way it was going to stay, or so Harry told himself.

“So we’re not missing anything anyway. The vote is four for Virginia, three for UCLA, and one apiece for North Carolina and South Florida. It seems pretty obvious who the finalists are, so Claudia, Jonas, are you willing to change your votes?” If they both changed to Virginia, this would be a short night.

No such luck though, as Jonas in particular wanted to argue his case, feeling that his school was the runner-up choice for a lot of the other people. He made his case for five minutes, talking about the look of the school, and the terrific programs that it offered. He had clearly been rehearsing this, but to no avail it seemed, as while no one argued with him, no one seemed willing to change their votes.

Claudia, knowing it was a lost cause, nevertheless got her feelings on the record about South Florida, though she did admit that any of the schools was fine with her. Drew picked up on this theme.

“Is there any one of the four schools that someone is adamantly against?”

No one seemed to, though there were no further arguments in favor of North Carolina or South Florida. It turned out that Hawaii’s advantages were cancelled out by Isla de Marauder and their ease of getting to it, while San Diego State was just not overwhelming in any single area.

Warrick proceeded to have his say for Virginia, and was soon echoed by the other three. They stressed the top notch academics, the strong but not overpowering magical presence there, and the beauty of the campus. They acknowledged that the less academically inclined might find it daunting, Marie even said that she would have worked harder than she ever had at school to make the grade. But they stressed that the two gang members least prepared for university would only be going part-time anyway, Harry and Jonas.

Sophie argued for the UCLA side. She cited the atmosphere of the campus, the tons of interesting things to do in Los Angeles, and the various programs on campus that seemed to fit each one of their interests. And Disneyland too, she brought that up more than once. Harry stayed relatively quiet, and exchanged more than one look with Hermione. After Sophie appeared to be done, he looked at Jonas and Claudia.

“Well you two, what are your new votes?”

Jonas looked like he was still thinking about it, so Claudia made her decision.

“I’ll go with Virginia.” The history part of it was what won her over, though her previous second choice had been North Carolina.. That left only one vote that had to change, and Harry decided to do it a

little differently, sensing that his side was not going to win their argument.

“Hermione, without knowing it ahead of time, is changing her vote to Virginia.” That had the pleasant effect of dropping some jaws, including that of Hermione herself. But the dropped jaws soon turned to smiles. Harry and Sophie had decided weeks before that they could easily live with Virginia as their destination, so this was not unexpected.

Warrick banged his gavel on the table.

“That is six votes boys and girls, and the nine of us, plus Ron and Lee and hopefully Ginny, will be heading to Charlottesville come August. All Hail Virginia!” They raised the pop and Snapple bottles in toast to their future destination. The paperwork would be sent in the next morning. The American Magical government would be putting up the money for the seven American gang members, while Harry would write a couple of checks to cover his and Hermione’s tuition deposits. He had already arranged with Murray to take a Saturday afternoon in February to go house hunting. He would buy, not rent, not wanting to put up with the hassle of having a landlord, and Diego Almodovar, upon hearing of that idea during their talk, had already volunteered to take him around. The American government either paid for dorm use, or provided an off-campus stipend, which Harry intended to use for basic food expenses, creature comforts, and other entertainment.

The rest of the evening/afternoon was spent swapping stories, a last round of relaxation in a way. Harry was already thinking ahead to the next League meeting, where he would be seeing Dumbledore for the first time since more or less punching his lights out.

Harry walked the DOM’s down to the trunk floo and their ride ‘home’.

“You know Neville, Luna, you’re more than welcome to live with us in Charlottesville, even if you’re working here. I know I’ve implied that before, but I wanted to say it straight out. The time change will be a bit weird, you having to get up to go to work in the middle of the night, but it’s doable. After all, Lee is going to try to pull it off” He had

already said as much to Ginny, though of course she and Luna would have to wait a year. Neville smiled at hearing that.

“I think it’s a great idea, Reiko did a great job of selling Virginia, and so has Hermione over the last few weeks.”

Hermione looked a bit abashed.

“I know I didn’t have a vote, and my parents are very grateful to you by the way, but I saw the way things were leaning.....I guess I just assumed that Virginia would be the school that was picked.”

“I figured the same thing, so don’t worry about it. Tell you parents that I expect them to get you an extra nice graduation present, since they’re saving all that money.” He was rewarded with a wry smile.

“I know it’s cliché, considering that Marie, Jonas, Drew, and Reiko are getting them, but they’ve promised to buy me a decent automobile, or rather to let me buy it once we’re over there.” That would make five cars for nine people.....really 11, since Ron and Lee weren’t likely to learn how to drive. Harry knew he would buy at least one himself, and was now wondering where they were going to put them all.

“We’re really going to need a big driveway.” Everyone laughed, and soon the DOM’s were all back at Hogwarts, Remus and his faculty none the wiser about where they had been for a few hours. Which is just how everyone wanted it.

Saturday, February 7, 1998

1:30 pm GMT

The Leaky Cauldron, private conference area.

The League meeting had droned on for what seemed like forever, but had really just been 90 minutes so far. New League Head Judy Posthumus ran a disciplined and straight forward meeting, but a lot of the older members seemed intent on making speeches, if only to try

and impress her. Harry was about two more speeches from going to Rufus and very publicly asking to renegotiate their deal. Apparently Arthur could see the look on his face thinking exactly that, and he quickly wrote down a note and passed it through Bill and George. It read:

Everyone can see how impatient you're getting Harry. Just do some Occlumency exercises and think about other things.

Harry smiled when he read it, and adopted a smile for the rest of the meeting. Dumbledore had shown up at the last moment, and while his chair was a bit closer to Harry than either of them would have preferred, there had been no fireworks as of yet.

Speaking of fireworks:

BOOM!!!! BOOM!! BOOM!!

A series of explosions could be heard from the outside, and very near as well. Travis had Aurors stationed outside The Leaky Cauldron, both visible and invisible, and one of them ran in seconds later.

“It's the Death Eaters! They're attacking Gringotts!”

End Chapter

Author's Note: In prep for Hallows, I re-read Prince for the first time in 23+ months, and while Prince and World are NOT compliant with each other, I did notice some inaccuracies in how I described Hogwarts past. These are things I just made up for the hell of it, that Prince contradicts, and since World was not begun until four months after Prince was published, I should have done it better. Mea Culpa. Also, Hallows is now out of course, and like with Prince, I am going to feel free to appropriate characters, though not situations, from it. You'll see what I mean soon. One last note: I don't mind telling you that it feels weird to write an HP story with canon now completed, and it must be a bit strange to read one too, just know that we are much closer to the end of this particular story than to the beginning.

Saturday, February 7, 1998, continued

1:30 pm GMT

The Leaky Cauldron, private conference area

"It's the Death Eaters! They're attacking Gringotts!" Her words were punctuated by the sounds of a few more explosions in the near distance.

There was dead silence in the room as everyone took that in for a second, while also listening for more signs from outside, and then everyone leapt to their feet. Travis, fortunately, had a very loud voice, and it penetrated the cacophony.

"QUIET!! I want Auror crews A through E to get back to The Ministry, just in case this is a feint! As soon as you make contact with Diggory, lock it down! Crews F through H get over to Hogwarts with Headmaster Lupin and his faculty! The rest of you, let them through and then follow me!" He assumed it was a feint of some kind, no one was stupid enough to assault Gringotts were they? Was this the final battle, five months early? He had a few seconds to ponder this as the 24 Aurors quickly left the room, along with the Hogwarts faculty.

Each Auror crew was three people, so 15 peeled off to go The Ministry, where Senor Undersecretary Amos Diggory usually ran

things when Rufus was at League meetings, and nine of them followed Remus, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sarah Westbrook, and Hagrid back to school. Sarah was not so long in her job that she didn't look conflicted, but Travis just pointed for her to follow Remus, and she did as ordered. The better crew leaders were always in the latter letters of the alphabet, and while not all of them were in the room right now, they would be augmented by the League members.....most of whom couldn't run very fast, but Gringotts was not far away.

The League, minus its departed Auror members, was 55 members currently, and they all followed Travis and Rufus out the door as they made their way to Gringotts. They could see the smoke in the distance, and the closer they got, the less magical some of the explosions sounded. There was no time to wonder about this, as the noise kept getting louder and louder.

Harry, Fred, and George ran at the front of the column, next to Travis and Sanford Jenkins as the Gringotts building grew larger and larger. They quickly saw why the explosions were somewhat odd sounding:

They were being made by what looked to be about two dozen giants, who were systematically leveling the outside of the bank with what looked to be tree trunks from a distance, but were really metal poles of indeterminate origin. How they got into Diagon Alley in the first place was something that would be examined thoroughly afterward, as giants had a very hard time traveling by portkey. There were a few Death Eaters directing the carnage, and a very large Dark Mark was over the bank. The League people were all running as fast as their age and their wearing of robes would allow, straight into the about to occur melee.

The twins and Harry, besides being the youngest members, were also not wearing robes, they were attired in their usual League uniform of jeans and Weasley sweaters. So they made first contact with the dozen Death Eaters who were now laying down covering fire, though not very accurately, as they were soon screaming at the giants to abandon their considerable destruction and turn their attention to the newcomers. Sounds of screaming could be heard inside the bank as the WWW three let loose their first barrage.

ABRUMPERE! ABRUMPERE! ABRUMPERE!

Three explosion hexes slammed into the nearest Death Eaters, all torso shots, knocking them down and doing some serious damage, while causing more Death Eaters to duck around for some cover. Harry took one look at the giants and figured that Repulsar would be useless here, the giants probably wouldn't even notice Pulse Spells hitting them. But he and the twins did have one advantage that no one on either side had:

They were wearing dragon hide vests.

After the Stephen Dale fiasco, Harry decided that he would wear it any time that he left the friendly confines of Great Lakes, heavy as it was. He described it to a skeptical Sophie as nothing more than a weight vest designed to make himself stronger, though that wasn't why of course. She just muttered something about hoping that he knew what he was doing, and let it go at that. His Christmas presents to Fred and George were specifically tailored vests of their own, costing a lot of money to buy pitch black market dragon hide. He felt it was worth it though, and had wanted more of them, but the material was that hard to come by.

The vests immediately paid dividends as a series of Stupefy spells just bounced off them, most Death Eaters were 'trained' to go for the torso, the largest spot to hit. Did not work too well here though, as the WWW's shifted fire to the nearest giant, who would make Hagrid look like a pygmy, and they were all noticeably larger than Grawp, who would surely have come in handy right about now.

Travis, Sanford, and the younger echelon of the League, roughly 20 men and women, now crashed into the remaining nine Death Eaters, who had been amazed when their point blank Stunners had just bounced off the WWW's. This slight distraction gave the League members all the time they needed to Stupefy the Death Eaters. The rear echelon of the League came puffing up and now it was getting a bit crowded as some enraged giants started attacking the newcomers.

The Explosion Hexes of the WWW's were barely doing any damage to the giant they were taking on, and the larger one was advancing on

them when Harry decided that enough was enough, and raised his wand up a little.

AVADA KEDAVRA!

It landed right in the giant's abdomen, though it didn't come close to killing him. The twins had just been waiting for him to do it, and launched their own Killing Curses toward the same spot:

AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!

They were direct hits, and brought the giant, Froke, to his knees, where Harry, having laid down a Rebounding Charm, bounced up and leapt on to his back and put his wand in Froke's ear.

AVADA KEDAVRA!

That did the trick, and those League members who weren't dodging for their lives took immediate note of it. One was Travis, another Dumbledore, the latter of whom was impressed in spite of himself. Travis screamed the loudest.

"Use Killing Curses! Right at their heads! No one goes inside until we take care of these giants!" He had no idea what awaited them inside, and the last thing he wanted was someone rashly going in, it was better to leave no threat at their backs.

Dumbledore found himself fighting alongside Arthur and Bill, and the three of them quickly took down a giant and moved on to another. One problem though:

30 Death Eaters portkeyed into the battle, using the specially designated portkey/Apparition area that Gringotts had been granted. Anyone else coming in needed to use that or the one in front of the bookstore, quite inconvenient. The one near WWW was still mostly covert, and Lee had locked the door up with as many spells as he could, and had the shop's defensive plan all set to go.

The newly arrived Death Eaters spread out onto three lines of attack and defense, with the giants in the middle. Rufus and company could only hope that the goblins inside

Meanwhile, at Hogwarts.

The Aurors and Hogwarts faculty Apparated to the nearest spot they could, right in front of the front gate. They sprinted the half kilometer to the front doors only to find that nothing was wrong or out of the ordinary, at least on the surface. Sprout, as she had been during the Lucious Malfoy trial, was in charge, and quickly reported that nothing was amiss, seeming surprised at all the hubbub.. Remus turned to Kate Sackhoff, the leader of Tonk's crew, and the senior person here.

"Get back to Diagon Alley and help there, I'll lock the castle down the second you get outside." It was school policy, dating back to Dumbledore, that when half the faculty was at their League meeting, no students were allowed outside, though they would still have the run of the castle. Remus dearly hoped that no one had snuck outside, though that would be confirmed soon.

Sackhoff knew that Biller had given her no such wiggle room in her instructions, but a locked down castle devoid of Dark students was not in any real danger. She pointed a finger at one crew.

"You three stay here, the rest follow me."

The six Aurors, including a reluctant to go Tonks, went back outside, and Remus immediately locked the castle down, which put magical barriers on all windows, and sealed up the floo system and Owlery. He ordered the League teachers to go to the Common Rooms to fill the students in on what was going on. He put his wand to his throat and addressed his students.

"Attention students, this is Headmaster Lupin. A few minutes ago Death Eaters launched an assault on Gringotts. Ministry Aurors as well as The Dark Force Defense League are engaging Voldemort's forces as we speak. Hogwarts is hereby locked down for the duration of the conflict, and all students are to return to their Common Rooms

until further notice.” He paused for breath, and to consider what he would say next.

“Kids, this looks to be a major attack, and it’s not out of the question that the war might be decided today, that this might be the last day. I want you all to be ready for the worst, just in case. And by the worst I mean that Hogwarts might be next, if the Death Eater prevail. Look to your Prefects and DA leaders, I will keep you apprised of further developments. Thank you.” Some of the faculty would take issue with his doomsday talk, but most of them thought that the kids had a right to know.

It turned out that he didn’t need to keep them apprised of further developments, as the faculty members found out to their horror. McGonagall and Westbrook rushed up to the Gryffindor Common Room to find that the room was full of students listening to the battle unfold in real time.

On the Wizarding Wireless Network.

They had been doing a promotion in front of Flourish and Blotts as the attack had begun, and their on-air personality, Coyote Shivers, had, with barely a pause, gone from talking about business to describing the events in question. No one in Hogwarts would ever forget his calm description of the beginning:

“That’s Harry Potter and the Weasley twins out front, and three Explosion Hexes right into the front echelon of the Death Eaters!”

And seconds later:

“Potter just jumped on to the giant’s back and stuck his wand in his ear, and the giant goes down. Other Aurors and League members are now employing the Killing Curse against the giants, nothing else seems to be working.” The DOM’s knew that Harry and the twins had used the Killing Curse against werewolves before, but this somehow made it more real, though werewolves Remus Lupin and Draco Malfoy would probably not appreciate the distinction if asked.

To his credit, Shivers was not calling this like a sporting event, but as a news story, and there was no glee in his voice at all, whatever he may have been tempted to say on the air. The DOM's had all been studying near the fireplace, the Seventh Years for their NEWT's, Ginny and Luna just because. Ginny quickly threw up a Silencing Bubble and leaned forward.

"We have a way out of here, we can go help them."

Hermione and Neville immediately started shaking their heads in the negative, Hermione speaking first:

"No way Ginny, the castle is in lockdown, there's no way we can sneak out that won't cause a full scale inquiry." The Silencing Bubble let noise in, not out, and they still had an ear each to Shivers on the wireless.

"She's right Ginny, Harry would never forgive us if we screwed up that trunk system. And we would never know why either, because he would have us Obliviated the first chance he got." Oh yes he would, though he had left it more or less implied than stated outright. Neville wasn't willing to take any chances though.

"But he's out there! And Dad and Bill and the twins! You heard that guy, Harry, Fred and George were the first ones there! We have to help them!" Hermione was sympathetic, but unmoved.

"We will help them Ginny, by being here in case the worst should happen. Yes, we're as well trained as some of those League people, but there's nothing we can do but pray for them. Neville's right, Harry would consider it a betrayal."

Ginny turned to Luna and Ron, figuring that her brother at least would be in favor. But to her everlasting astonishment, Ron had a couple of tears coming out of his eyes.

"We have to let the professionals do their job Ginny, we have to count on the fact that Dad and our brothers know what they're doing. Our place is here." Ron barely believed a word of this, hence the

tears, but he was saying what he thought was the right thing to say. Ginny seemed to realize this, as Hermione reached over and brushed the tears away, as tender a moment between the two as the other three had ever seen. Luna said nothing, though her usual smile was nowhere to be found right now, as she was barely listening to her friends, concentrating on the wireless.

This was happening in homes all over magical Britain, they were not the only ones listening in. Hermione dissolved the bubble only to see Sarah Westbrook standing next to them. She had a grim look on her face and did not beat around the bush.

“Don’t even think about it guys.”

“Think about what Professor?” Not said very convincingly, even for Hermione, who despite her reputation was not a half bad prevaricator when the situation called for it. Westbrook knew what that conference had to have been about though, and wasn’t having any of it.

“Hermione, I know you lot must have some secret way out of this castle. Harry is too well informed about things going on here for it to be anything else. Now for the record, I don’t care if you can come and go as you please or not, that’s the Headmaster’s problem, not mine. But you are to stay in this Common Room until the all clear is sounded.” This was a lucky guess really, as the trunk had barely been in Ginny’s room for a month. Westbrook clearly underestimated the value of Dobby and Winky.

“Yes ma’am.” Multiplied by five, though Neville had been thinking about warning the Americans about all of this. He figured that Dobby might do it, but they might appreciate a familiar face with some of the details gotten from the wireless. That was his plan anyway, but now it seemed like Sarah was going to watch them until it was all over. Soon McGonagall joined them, seeming to prefer their company over the rest of the House, all of whom were riveted to the wireless.

Meanwhile, at The Ministry of Magic:

Senior crew leader James Bamber, Tonks' former boss, led the five crew contingent back to the home base, where they found Amos Diggory doing the same as the DOM's, listening to it on the wireless. He was visibly shaken, but did not argue a whit as Bamber locked him in Rufus' office with six Aurors surrounding him, as Rufus' office was the only gateway to the new Detention Area. Diggory was easily the highest person in the line of succession who was not at Gringotts. Bamber began calling in all the off-duty personnel, and immediately directing them to get to the outer perimeters of Diagon and Knockturn Alleys. Bamber was not thinking about winning a battle, he was more concerned with preventing the escape.

Flashback to inside Gringotts Bank, right before the attack.

The movie *Heat* instructs us that there are two basic ways to rob a bank: on the prowl, or strong through the door. On the prowl is usually done at night, when no one is around but a security guard or two, but has the disadvantage of the vault being more securely locked than during the day. The advantages include, if done correctly, no law enforcement coming, and likely enough time to do a thorough job. Strong through the door is a full out assault with weapons, threats, and perhaps some hostage taking. The goals are the same: Get the money, get out.

Gringotts had never been successfully robbed before, in the 1000 plus years of its existence, and the powers that be there trumpeted that fact to anyone who would listen. But like at any Las Vegas casino, there had been many attempts at glory. All the attempts had been on the prowl, including the most famous attempt, the attempted robbery of the Philosopher's Stone in 1991, and that was by far the most successful, since no true footprints were left, even if all they found was an empty vault. No one, not any Dark Wizard in British Magical History, had ever seriously attempted strong through the door.

Until now.

This exposed the weakness in Gringotts security: They were not fully prepared for a frontal assault in force. There were contingency plans for everything of course, including a Ministry assault or one by the now defunct Order of the Phoenix. But they had not been studied or

drilled upon in some time. Voldemort had sent his two dozen giants to deal with the outside, and three dozen trolls and assorted other Dark Creatures to do the damage on the inside. Their shock troops were not Death Eaters for the most part, but Inferi, who were corpses animated to do their Master's bidding. And their Master's bidding was to kill as many goblins as possible, so as to clear the way for the main body of Death Eaters to go after some specifically chosen vaults. That those vaults were not where they thought they were came as some surprise.

The goblins were not totally caught off-guard, and their security teams slowed down the Inferi and Trolls long enough for the League to arrive outside, but they were severely outnumbered as their knives, swords, and other medieval weaponry were no match for the relentless assault of Death Eaters cherry picking behind the trolls and Inferi. The main floor was quickly cleared away, including the murder of the 13 people who were doing business on the main floor of the bank, none of them players in our story. The Death Eaters used every mass Explosion Hex they could do, and the ground floor of Gringotts was quickly turned into rubble. What was worse, is the damage weakened the support structure for the five floors up above, which housed the offices of the goblins and their human employees, including Bill's new one on the fourth floor. Whether this turned into victory or defeat, Gringotts would be much changed.

The goblins had their own version of the Anthony Hook trunk floor, and soon goblins from all over Europe were either transported into Gringotts to help with the defense, or transported to their own country's bank to make sure that this was not a single piece in a larger plan. No able bodied goblin would be left at home.

As it happened, there was not a larger plan to rob the goblin banks, there were only so many Dark Wizards to go around for these kinds of things, but like the Ministry sending people to the home base and Hogwarts, it worked in that it diluted the resources of the good guys. Voldemort, not the best tactical planner as recent events had indicated, nevertheless took this into consideration as part of his bigger picture plan. He wasn't the only Dark Wizard in Europe who fancied himself a Warlord, but Tom Riddle was above cooperating with anyone who might seek to supplant him.

At the ten minute mark of the attack, when Harry and the twins were taking down their first giant, there were 75 Inferi, 30 trolls, and 20 Death Eaters inside the bank doing battle with 130 goblins in various areas, the other Dark Creatures having been killed by the second and third wave of the goblin defense. Voldemort had not yet been sighted by any goblins, but that meant little at this point in time. The goblins were slowly being pushed back into the bowels of the bank, and were close to having to make a final stand, after which the Death Eaters and company would have full access to the vaults below, assuming that they could get inside them.

Meanwhile, back outside the bank:

The 30 Death Eaters seriously complicated matters for our heroes, as they managed to cut down four of the League members on the first salvo, all using Avada Kedavra. Only eight of the giants remained, but they tied down half the League, as some of the older members could not fire off Killing Curses with the frequency of others. The WWW three, at George's suggestion, moved a couple of the dead giants bodies in front of them as a barricade, and began taking long range potshots at the newcomers. They were soon joined by Travis, Rufus, Rob Graham and Edgar Stiles, the latter of two having been instructed to not get out of breathing distance of The Minister. Arthur, Dumbledore, and Bill, among others, took up station next to them with another giant body.

The giant's body made for quite the nice barricade, as long as the defenders ducked down low enough. The Death Eaters were at the entrance of the bank, but they did not seem interested in filing in there just yet. The giants were down to seven, but they had fallen out of effective range for Avada Kedavra, at least on people of their size and strength. Harry looked at Travis:

"They're trying to stall over there. How many more Aurors and such can we expect?"

"Not more than two dozen tops, and most of them will be guarding against any getaways. You contemplating something rash?"

“Dobby!” That was always the first step to something rash, as Travis had warned Mike Jacobson back in September.

The wee man popped in, having taken a position 20 meters away where he could see everything, but not be in the line of fire.

“Yes Harry?”

“Get our brooms, three bags of swamps, and a bag of spell grenades, and not a word of this to certain people, understand?”

“Yes Harry.” Certain people being mainly the Americans, who might just decide that enough was enough and join the battle, something Harry wanted to prevent if at all possible. He had not yet seen any of them use their wands in anger, and this was not the time for them to start.

“What are you going to do with your brooms? You’re not seriously going to try an aerial assault are you?” Husband of an professional flyer he might be, Travis did not like this plan.

“We’ll create a lot of chaos, and a nice diversion for you lot to go in force. At the very least we’ll make them nervous.”

Dobby was now back with his items, and was told to have Winky plant herself at The Burrow to make sure that Molly did nothing rash, like trying to come to help. Molly could fight as well as her husband if the chips were down, but they did not want to risk anything with her.

“You guys with me?”

“You bet.”

“This is getting boring anyway.” Typical twin bravado, and to their credit, Arthur and Bill weren’t trying to stop them either.

Rufus just stared at them, knowing that there was no point in arguing.

“Be careful, don’t get too close that you can’t pull out. I know the Wronski Feint is great in Quidditch, but the other players aren’t firing Killing Curses when you’re doing it.” All the while the group was firing intermittently at the Death Eaters, ignoring the giants, while letting their magical energy recharge a bit for the Killing Curses to come.

The WWW’s divided up their weapons, mounted their brooms, and took off into the air, drawing a little fire from the Death Eaters, but nothing major, since they made a point of flying in the opposite direction.

Coyote Shivers didn’t know what to make of this at first, but he soon figured it out, as did the bad guys a minute or so later. He described the events to the rapt attention of most everyone in magical Britain, including a previous napping Molly Weasley, who didn’t realize that Winky had no intention of letting her leave The Burrow.

“And it looks like Potter and the Weasley twins are going to mount an attack from the air. They’re flying over the Death Eaters now, and they’re dropping some objects, could be their special Spell Grenades that their shop offers.....Wow! What looks like a series of Percussion Hexes just dropped on to the left flank of the Death Eaters, and they went down like bowling pins.....and now the Aurors are attacking on that flank, Minister Scrimgeour and Head Auror Biller are leading them, they certainly don’t shirk from action, I hope Fudge is listening to this wherever he is right now. Potter and company are making another pass, they’re dropping more items around the giants, and Potter is aiming his wand at the fallen objects.”

They were swarms, the heavy duty model, and the slow to begin with giants were now even slower as Harry hit most of the swarms he aimed at, while the twins would grouse later that they had never developed a swarm that would activate on contact. Harry, Fred and George were just waiting for the Death Eaters to be winnowed down, then they would go at the giants from the air and take them out.

Travis and his people made short work of the 15 Death Eaters on the left flank, and Dumbledore and Arthur kept the center and the right flank busy enough that they couldn’t help their comrades. The Death

Eaters were now using nothing but Avada Kedavra, and the Ministry people were forced to do the same, since any stunned DE's would just be woken up by their confederates.

Fred swooped down to his father with a message.

“Attack the right flank in one minute, we'll make sure they're occupied.”

Arthur nodded, the second highest ranking Wizard in Britain taking combat orders from his 19 year old twins and their 17 year old partner, and without a whit of complaint either. Dumbledore, surprisingly, was not saying much either, except for conferring with Bill over who would go where, he saw the utility in the plan. Arthur counted down the minute in his head, and when the mental countdown hit zero.

“NOW!”

25 League members started firing curses at the 15 person right flank of the Death Eaters, quickly pushing their backs against the wall, literally and figuratively. Harry and the twins came from over the top, behind the bank, and dropped another series of Percussion Hex grenades on them, knocking most of them down before they even knew of the danger from up there. Dumbledore and Bill had agreed to used Stupefy on their targets, so as to obtain some prisoners for questioning, and they took down three Death Eaters between them. Arthur and Sanford Jenkins' crew went over to the now vacant Apparition/Portkey designated area, and put up wards to make it off-limits. Now it was just the giants, and Travis sent off another crew to the portkey area at Flourish and Blotts, just in case there were anymore reinforcements coming.

The giants may have been large, but they were by no means stupid. They saw the writing on the wall, and the fact that they were surrounded. They tried a mass breakout through the perceived weak area, the one between Arthur/Dumbledore and Rufus/Travis. They were somewhat successful, as they were hit with crossfire from both side, but they were fast enough, if one can believe that, that only two of them went down immediately. The other six started running for The

Leaky Cauldron, not their initial entry point, and Harry and the twins were only able to knock out one more before the last five remaining giants slammed into the pub.

They wanted no part of muggle London mind you, but they knew that the pub was valuable enough that it was not to be destroyed lightly, especially by Aurors coming in. Their leader was alive and among them, and he would negotiate for their escape once this was all over.

The front of the bank was now clear, but it had taken 15, very long, minutes to do so. Harry, Fred, and George landed next to Rufus, who looked at them with a smug sort of pride.

“Very clever you lot, very clever. Too young to be useful to the League, hah! Now Bill here knows the bank the best, he’ll lead us in. Let’s move!” They all got in formation behind Bill and Rufus, with very little of the typical complaining that had become the unofficial hallmark of the League in its 16 month current iteration. This was their first real test, other than the stunning of Marcus Flint and his people last October. Bill was the only human employee of Gringotts to be a League member, though the goblins had been told that they were free to send an observer to any League meeting that they liked, though they never did. Bill had done some surreptitious lobbying of his boss, Fortrap, who doubled as Harry’s account manager, but the old goblin was non-committal at best, dismissive at worst. In reality the goblin hierarchy feared that if they sent someone to a League meeting in any official capacity, a quid pro quo demand would soon be forthcoming, such as a human observer at a Gringotts Board of Directors meeting. And that was never, never, never going to happen.

Only six of the League members, none of them Aurors, had been killed in the attack, as opposed to 50 Death Eaters. For those who thought about such things, this did pose a problem. Were they opposing Death Eater trainees or something? Or was there something else going on? The situation would not become more clear anytime soon.

Bill led them inside the bank, and they quickly saw that the ground floor was one big pile of rubble, with desks and various other office implements from the top floors littering the ground. Also littering the

ground were many, many dead bodies. Most of them were goblins, but some were Inferi that the goblin front echelon had managed to kill.....well, kill again. There were a few trolls as well, trolls were the goblins' ancient enemy, and two Death Eaters. A quick check under their masks revealed a pair of low level soldiers that Bill recognized as Slytherin schoolmates of his back in the day, and he said as much to the front group that included his family, Dumbledore, Travis, Rufus, and Bones. Tonks was further back, having arrived in time, but was endeavoring to move closer to the front.

There was, however, no noise coming from the upper floors, which Bill did not see as a good thing. Gringotts goblins worked six day weeks, and there should have been a full five floors of beings up there. Travis sent an Auror crew up to check things out, while Bill led them to the vault area. The good guys were moving slowly and cautiously, which was not to the goblins' benefit at the moment, but Travis wanted to make sure that there were no ambushes awaiting them.

Bill quickly got them to the door, and would have done the complicated entry sequence for them if not for the fact that the door, and a meter of the wall on both sides, had been obliterated. But there was a Silencing Barrier up, and once it had been taken down, then they could hear the screams. They didn't need Extendable Ears to hear that the battle was not going well for the goblins, as the sounds were a bit far away for comfort. Harry had an idea.

“Accio Death Eater!”

One of the dead Death Eaters from the lobby sped its way through the crowd and up to Harry. He took out the Tom Riddle wand that Dobby had gotten for him, and violently stabbed the Death Eaters's arm with it.

Because, you see, the Death Eater was not dead.

Harry had been somewhat close to him during Bill's identifying, and had seen the man's chest going up and down, barely, and only because Harry had been looking from just the right angle. A dead

Death Eater, while certainly the preference, would not have worked here for what Harry wanted. Speaking of which:

“What are you doing?” That was Bones, who had not been filled in on this particular ploy from December in Milwaukee.

“Giving some of them down there a moment of pause.” Some of them, because the newer Death Eaters, and there were quite a few, had been Dark Marked by Voldemort’s alternate wand, which he had stolen from Ollivander’s many years earlier.

Indeed they could hear some human screams from down there, as Harry had pressed the wand in there pretty hard. He kept pressing and called for Dobby again.

“Yes Harry?”

“Get down there and find out where the goblins are, how good or bad a shape they’re in, and where the Death Eaters are. And for the love of God don’t get caught by any bad guys.”

“It will be done Harry.” He popped off, and Travis and Rufus could be seen verbally kicking themselves for not thinking of this earlier. They slowly advanced down the tunnel, which could be done by foot, even if it was much faster via the cart, all of which had been destroyed by the goblins during their retreat, not wanting to make it easier for the Death Eaters and friends. Dobby was back in about two minutes.

“The goblins say, not very politely, to please hurry the bloody hell up, or words to that effect. There are enough of them to make a final stand, but not enough to attack without help from us, or so they say.”

“Where are they?”

“About one kilometer down, with the bad people and their creatures about 100 meters away from them,. They are advancing intermittently, as the goblins seem to have slowed them down some. They still outnumber the goblins, but soon they will come in range of the

dragons.” That was the nuclear option, so to speak, as the goblins had their own reasons for wanting the dragons to be restrained.

“Are they looting any vaults?”

“They are not carrying anything with them, and I did not seem them inside any vaults.” That was the best he could do there, and it was good enough. Travis motioned toward Dobby while looking at Harry, as if to say ‘you mind if I give your man some instructions?’. Harry’s motions indicated ‘be my guest’ and so Biller did.

“Dobby, go down there and tell the goblins that we’re coming, in force, and to retreat as slowly as possible to let us catch up. Then come back up and go ahead of us, invisible like, and let us know when we run into the rearguard.”

“Yes Mr. Travis.” But only after seeing Harry nodding in agreement. Dobby only accepted direct orders from Harry, Fred, George, and now Sophie. Everyone else needed a nod from one of the Big Four, or prior permission.

He was back in a few seconds.

“Again, they say to hurry up, but they will be ready. Give them a sign of some sort when you wish them to counterattack.” He popped away again to go on ‘point’.

There was one problem here: A lot of the retired League members were not going to easily negotiate a downward kilometer walk at their age and lack of physical endurance, at least not if they wanted to fight at the end of it. No, a kilometer was not a long way in theory, but to a 65 year old man or woman, magical or not, it was a hike. Rufus couldn’t help that though, and instructed the others to keep up as best they could, they could be the reserve element in their attack. Bill still led them, with Travis, Rufus, Bones, Dumbledore, and the WWW three right behind him. Harry and the twins made a whispering plan to ensure that at least two of them were always in front of Arthur at all times, if possible.

Arthur's hearing was excellent, and while he touched at the protectiveness of his sons, he would have no part of it come the battle. He didn't say anything though, he wouldn't put it past Harry to Stupefy him and have Dobby drag him back to the surface, all for his own good of course. The group was moving quickly enough that it would be about five more minutes before they made contact with the Death Eaters' main body, but the going was a bit treacherous, and even the rash WWW three were not eager to start jogging.

Dumbledore, not a young man in the best of circumstances, and barely recovered from the mixture treatment that he was still unaware of, was slowly dropping back to the middle of the pack. He walked next to Tonks, Kingsley being at The Ministry.

"Are you okay Albus, you're breathing kind of heavily." They all were, the air was rather close as they got further down the tunnel, right now Arthur was thanking Merlin for the walks he and Molly had started taking.

"I am fine Tonks, just a little worn out from the day's events so far." He looked it too.

Tonks reached her wand out and did a mini version of Mobilicorpus on him, which did help.

"Thank you, that's just what I need."

"Anytime."

"Harry fought well, did he not."

She had been waiting for the first Harry reference.

"I don't know sir, I wasn't here for the first part of it. He always fights well though, from what I gather." An oblique reference to Harry's last set-to, but Dumbledore just smiled, taking no overt insult.

"He is the most gifted magical fighter I have ever seen Tonks, in combining tactics with magic and raw power. He and the twins are a

team to rival any in your Auror Command, and who would have ever thought that? I must say, his move to The United States and the attendant muggle movie watching was a masterstroke. It has done him far better than we could have done at Hogwarts.” That Remus would have been Harry’s Defense teacher was not lost on Remus’ live-in companion, but she chose not to respond to the dig, instead asking him the question that so many were asking. The entire conversation was in hushed tones, though sound did not carry too well down there.

“Is this it Albus? Is this the final battle? Why else would Voldemort go after Gringotts?”

Dumbledore had his suspicions, but oddly chose to mimic Remus from back in July.

“I believe he is more concerned with wiping out our goblin friends. I would be surprised if he stole much gold here today. The goblins will not declare for his side, or any other side for that matter, so they must be wiped out, at least according to Death Eater logic. I wonder if Voldemort is even here.”

Even Harry was wondering that, and was seriously contemplating opening up his scar connection to find out, something he had been tempted to do a few other times, but had never given in to the lure of. Mostly he hoped not, as he did want more time to get ready for their confrontation, and Voldemort would also be a formidable presence against anyone he ran into as well.

It was another three minutes before Dobby popped back in.

“The rear guard is 50 meters in front of you, and they know that you are coming.” Harry pulled Dobby behind him, and motioned to the twins.

“Serpensortia!” Not loud enough to carry 50 meters.

Fred and George mimicked him, and soon three snakes were on the ground, waiting for orders. It was just like the Lucius Malfoy trial, only

this time the battleground was dark, and the snakes would not easily be seen, especially as the WWW's had conjured them to be colored black. Harry pointed his wand at them and hissed in Parseltongue.

“Go down and kill as many of them as you can. Do not harm any goblins.” He could only hope that there were no human hostages down there, though Bill had once told him that most of the bank's human employees did not work this late on the weekends, and all of the dead bodies upstairs appeared to be customers. The snakes nodded, or so it appeared, at Harry, and slithered down the still narrow corridor.

The League started to march behind them, and they had covered about 20 meters when they heard cries of pain coming from the rearguard, and curses being launched. They were still a couple of twists away, so they saw no lights coming from wands, only sounds of incantations and the impacts resulting. The WWW three repeated their Serpensortia trick, and sent three more conjured snakes down the corridor, this time to a reduced rearguard that was ready for them. There were fewer screams, but a lot more spells as the Death Eaters in question went ‘rock and roll’ with their wands, as the League members got closer and closer. This was just what Harry wanted, as while the bad guys would be on edge, they would also be a little tired, while he and his colleagues had had a few minutes to magically recharge, as it were. There was now just one more bend, and this time Travis, deciding that the Head Auror needed to take charge here just a little bit, motioned for Sanford Jenkins and his crew to come with him.

“Reducto to the chest, check your fields of fire.” Said quietly, and it was standard Auror doctrine. He motioned to Harry that no more snakes were required, and on a silent count of three, the four Aurors whipped around the corner and launched a series of silent Stunners at the what amounted to a four person rearguard, down from eight before Harry's snake adventure.

They got all four, though one Death Eater managed a hasty Avada Kedavra that missed Jenkins by less than six inches. This last spell

got the attention of the Death Eaters in front of them, as it was not accompanied by cries of:

“Snakes!”

It would seem that the Death Eaters, despite the history of Slytherin and their usual nearness to Nagini, did not much care for snakes that weren't on their side in battle. Imagine that. This time, the main body of Death Eaters knew that their attackers-to-be were human.

There was no time for the League members to question their prisoners, so they were quickly stripped of their wands and portkeys, and tied up very securely. This was done as the lead element of the League moved forward. Harry continued his distraction technique by having the twins and he loose a swarm of locusts toward our villains, causing no immediate damage, but discombobulating them enough to gain the good guys some advantage.

Meanwhile, in the Death Eater camp:

Albert Runcorn was the Death Eater in charge of this operation. He had long been a mid-level soldier in Voldemort's army, the magical equivalent of a muggle captain, but death has a way of promoting those types of people. His mission had been nothing more than to kill as many goblins as possible, while reeking the maximum amount of havoc possible on Gringotts itself. No mention was made of stealing anything, though that was probably due to the goblins' recent habit of moving vaults around, and randomly switching numbers on them. So while robbing, say, Harry's vault would have been a nice coup, they had no real idea of where it was.

So far Runcorn, who had had no part in the actual planning of this mission, was ahead on the whole. They had laid waste to the upper floors and killed most of the goblin office personnel, which ironically did the most damage to the bank, since they took the longest to train and effectively replace. They had also wiped out a bare majority of the security force, and had the others pinned down. All was well, except for one tiny little issue.

The Dark Force Defense League coming up behind them.

The time of this attack was not a coincidence by the way, Voldemort wanted the League to come a running. What he did not plan on, was having two dozen giants and 50 Death Eaters, the ones outside, wiped out with barely any League/Ministry losses. He, Nott, and Pettigrew, none of whom were within 100 kilometers of the bank at present, had assumed that the outside force would take a long time to be defeated, if in fact it was defeated in the first place. They knew that they were sending the most inexperienced troops out to delay the League, but the bad man would be very taken aback when he learned how bad the rout had been.

That was Runcorn's problem right now, when to escape? They had eliminated the anti-portkey wards as they went along, with a special spell that Voldemort himself had provided. So a getaway was not as hard as one might think. But Voldemort would want an after action report, in great detail, and if Runcorn retreated his people too early, his life wouldn't be worth the lint in his robe's pockets. He turned to his deputy, a young Death Eater named Terrence Ibbotson.

"Well Terrence, we can attack the goblins or attack the Ministry people, not both. Which do you recommend?" The reply was immediate.

"The goblins, that's what we're here for. The Ministry will be too cautious, and move slowly. We should send the Inferi after them to delay them, and finish the goblins off once and for all. Then we can escape and return with honor." Ibbotson, a Slytherin who had been Head Boy during Harry's Second Year at Hogwarts, was one of Voldemort's favorites, and was there to more or less be his representative. No one understood that better than Runcorn himself, who found himself nodding in agreement.

"All right then, Umbridge, you and Neely take the Inferi and attack the Ministry, while we put paid to the goblins. Fight to the last corpse, then meet up with us at the bottom."

Yes, that Umbridge, who was not considered valuable enough to keep back like most of their best soldiers were. Indeed Voldemort had

specifically ordered her there, hoping that she and Harry might have a moment.

She nodded, and Runcorn gave his instructions to the Inferi. They could not run per se but they moved quickly enough considering that they had no free will of their own.

Runcorn watched them disappear, and motioned for his remaining Death Eaters to move around the next bend, though he told them not to charge until they actually saw the goblins and what they had planned for them. He was assuming some kind of last ditch stand by the creatures.

Umbridge had different ideas, and before Nelson Neely could stop her, she put a Disillusionment Charm on herself, and quietly crept forward along the wall. She knew the likelihood that some of her old 'friends' would be coming down the hall at them, and the former Grand Inquisitor had some unfinished business to take care.

The good guys heard the Inferi marching toward them and stopped their advance, quickly setting up an ad hoc ambush. It was hard in these somewhat narrow corridors, but that was taken care of by Harry, Bill, Fred, and George getting on their knees, with Travis, Arthur, Bones, and Dumbledore hunched over their shoulders, and four more, including Rufus, standing up straight. That would give 12 wands aimed at the intruders.

Inferi caused a sense of panic when they hit people unawares. They had unnatural strength, and an ability to withstand a lot of spell damage. But one problem: They could not think on their feet, or think at all for that matter. They just kept moving forward, if that's what they were instructed to do, they could not retreat on their own.....and in this case Albert Runcorn was now too far away to give them the necessary orders.. A group of opponents that was ready for them? Well they wouldn't have much of a problem, in theory, which is why Inferi were not really used that often.

The first wave came around the corner, and were quickly cut to pieces by a salvo of Explosion Hexes by the 12 League members. The four standing up straight were replaced by four others, while the

eight not standing used various Stunners and Repulsars to keep them back, giving those standing time to get out of the way for new wands to come up. They went through 20 Inferi that way before Nelson Neely, the only Death Eater willing to show himself, starting using the corpses as 'human' shields. He got off three Killing Curses, and he was rather a good shot, hitting on two of them. Travis looked up as the second body fell, Dumbledore and Harry both nailing Neely with Killing Curses of their own. Biller's gasp was one of horror.

The second shot had hit Amelia Bones square in the forehead. She was dead.

Her place in line was quickly filled by Jenkins, and the Inferi kept coming, and the League kept firing. Soon the corpses were corpses again, and they could hear the Death Eaters and trolls making final contact with the goblins. Rufus waved everyone forward, as Arthur knelt by Bones, closing her eyes. This was not the best idea in retrospect, as Umbridge, seeing that Harry was blocked from her firing line, came waddling up to Arthur and put her wand at his head, the wand contact breaking the Disillusionment Charm on her.

"Hem hem!" That got everyone's attention, as Travis quickly raised his wand.

"I don't think so Biller, put it down or the Weasley family will need a new patriarch."

"If you know what's good for you, you'll let him go right now." Very movie-ish by Harry, but it was the first thing that popped into his head to say.

"Lower your wand Potter, I've dreamed of this moment ever since your lies put me in Azkaban."

Harry had dreamed of this moment too, or at least the general idea of it. He didn't much care for the idea of Arthur being held prisoner, but that was easily worked around.

"If I put it down, you'll let him go and take me instead, right?"

“Put it down and I won’t kill him.” She even sounded like she believed it herself.

She had to know that she was dead as soon as she fired her first spell, or so everyone there figured. There were no less than 10 wands trained on her besides Harry’s, the others moving forward to help the goblins. This was not what Umbridge had really intended, to delay them, but it was a welcome perk.

Harry knew that she wanted just one shot at him, and he was willing to give it to her, with a small twist. He carefully lowered his wand to the ground, making sure it did not fall into any cracks, his Tom Riddle model firmly in the back of his jeans, where it might blow a buttock off. He kept his left hand out, in a gesture of calming. She saw this and started to laugh that horrible laugh of hers.

“Now I did what you wanted, let him go.”

Umbridge stopped laughing, and smiled that simpering smile of hers.

“Avad.....”

That’s as far as she got, because as soon as she opened her mouth, Harry used his left hand to summon her wand. It seemed that Voldemort had not shared any stories of his last encounter with Harry, so she was not expecting her stick to fly so cleanly into his hand. Arthur took the opportunity to give her an elbow in the face, as Harry snapped her wand over his knee, Summoning his own from the floor with his other hand.

Umbridge dropped to her knees in pain, as Travis sent everyone but the Weasleys on ahead. As soon as they got around the corner:

“Very well, you won this round. Go ahead and put me back in prison.” Said with an air of resignation. But not so fast.

“Oh I think we can dispense with prison right now Delores.” Having said that, Travis Summoned Neely’s wand, and offered it to her.

“I wouldn’t want us to kill an unarmed woman.”

Harry just smiled at him, as Umbridge finally figured out what was going to happen here.

“You can’t kill me in cold blood Potter, that wouldn’t be playing the hero now would it?”

“You expect me to have mercy to show you?”

“Yes.” That’s what she genuinely thought, that supposed ‘good’ people would always show mercy to a captured foe.

“Just one problem with that theory.” He moved forward as Travis put Neely’s wand in her hand, though she was unwilling to grip it. Harry put the back of his hand in front of her face.

“I MUST NOT TELL LIES!” The scars were still visible, as Harry would not even think about trying to fix them as long as this moment was still possible.

Umbridge was now scared enough to act, and quickly whipped up her new wand, but not before Harry.

“ABRUMPERE!” He was not willing to use the Killing Curse on this thing, but the Explosion Hex in the face from inches away did all the damage. She crumpled to the floor, dead. Harry lowered his wand, and threw the pieces of her wand to the ground.

“Come on you lot, we have work to do.” They ran as quickly as they dared down the getting steeper by the step corridor, safe in the knowledge that any booby traps or the like would have been set off by their colleagues.

By now Rufus and Dumbledore, who interestingly enough had fought a battle or two together during the first Voldemort conflict, had just about reached the Death Eaters, who were fighting like crazy with the remaining goblins. The goblins were just barely holding their own, not

willing to retreat any longer, when the League slammed into the rear of the Death Eaters and trolls. They were quickly followed by Harry and company, whose Umbridge adventure had barely taken a couple of minutes, and they could all run faster to boot. Rufus screamed at the newcomers.

“Put up more wards, prevent their escape!” He punctuated that by killing a Death Eater with a nifty Slicing Curse across the throat.

Well it wasn't nifty for the Death Eater really.

Dumbledore was holding his own too, as the WWW three came up beside him. This was the first battle that Harry and Dumbledore had ever fought side by side in, and no one present would ever forget it. Arthur came up behind them just in time for an Explosion Hex to ricochet off a vault door and slam into his leg. It was done from just far enough away that it didn't take a chunk out of him, but it broke his shin bone all the same, and he went down. Fred and George redeployed to safeguard their father, while Bill took their place next to Harry and Dumbledore.

The goblins, who might have been grumbling the word 'Finally' to themselves as the magicals got there, pushed the counterattack with renewed vigor, as Travis and Jenkins were putting up ward after ward on the fly, to prevent anyone from leaving. They had seen the portkeys on the Death Eaters upstairs just as well as Rufus had, and assumed that there was some plan in place.

Runcorn and Ibbotson were still among the living, and were hidden safely behind a phalanx of trolls, firing at will against the goblins, who were now down to their last 40 troops. Harry and Dumbledore saw them hiding, and at Harry's signal, the two of them and Bill charged the half dozen trolls, using Abrumpere and Reducto as quickly as they could, all three with wands and hands alike. They cut down the trolls in their mass of fire, until Runcorn used Harry's own Earthquake Spell right back at them, there had been a copy of that same book in the former Riddle Manor, and Runcorn was something of a reader.

It lifted all around at their feet, and while Harry bounced up first, he was facing the wrong way. He loosed a Stunner at the nearest Death

Eater almost on instinct, and upon hitting her, he turned back to Runcorn and Ibbotson.

But he was too late.

They had seen their opportunity for a little glory, and loosed a pair of curses at his now side.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” “AVADA KEDAVRA!”

The curses headed straight for him, but did not hit him.

They hit Dumbledore instead, he had deliberately moved into the way. He grunted once, and fell to the ground, dead.

Bill had just gotten to his feet, and immediately sent a Stunner right at Runcorn, while Travis ran up and did the same to Ibbotson. Both had been recognized as Death Eater leaders, and it was thought to keep them alive for questioning. They had taken off their masks so as to communicate to their troops better, and it prolonged their lives longer than if they had kept them on.

Harry couldn't believe his eyes, Dumbledore was just lying there on the ground and not moving. He 'woke' back up as a Killing Curse missed him by a few inches, slamming into the wall behind Arthur and the twins. He turned back to the battle, and with a rage no Weasley had ever seen, rushed headlong into a pair of Death Eaters, blasting them aside as he spit out Repular after Repulsar, wanting nothing more than the feeling of spells coming out of his wand. He used the Slicing Charm that Rufus had used, and Travis had taught Harry over the summer, targeting anyone with a mask that he could.

The goblins made one last charge, and soon the Death Eater line was broken. A couple of them fled into the bowels of the tunnel, knowing that The Ministry was blocking the way out. The bad folk just assumed that the goblins had another way out of there, and while they were correct in theory, it was a way out that only the goblins themselves could see, and it was many kilometers down. The pair of them, who were not senior enough in Death Eater-land to know the

incantations that would let them void the wards and portkey out, would eventually surrender to the goblins a day later.

The rest of the Death Eaters chose to surrender, though there were only nine of them remaining alive and upright. They laid down their wands and presented themselves to the nearest Auror, preferring to go into Ministry custody rather than the tender mercies of the goblins. Not that it would do them much good, as they would soon find out.

Rufus took a moment to check on Dumbledore, he knelt by the body and felt futilely for a pulse. He looked up at the bloody figure that was Harry.

“He’s dead.”

“I know, he took a pair of Killing Curses meant for me.” Harry’s voice was a bit hollow, and Rufus nearly had a heart attack right then and there.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s right, from those two right there.” He pointed at Runcorn, whom he had never laid eyes on before, and Ibbotson, whom he remembered all too well from the two years they had shared at Hogwarts.

Rufus still couldn’t believe that Dumbledore was dead in the first place, so quickly on the heels of Bones, and then he had to process that the old man had died to save someone who had assaulted him as recently as a month ago, someone who professed to hate him, or at least had said so on multiple occasions.

“Are you okay Harry, is any of that blood yours?”

“I don’t think so sir.”

“What happened with Umbridge?”

“Killed while trying to escape is the official version.”

“I have no interest in the unofficial version right now. Where’s the goblin leader?” He was not really talking to Harry, who could barely tell Forttrap, his account manager, from the others, though they would not get to speak until later on.

The senior goblin, Freygang, was speaking with Bill. Freygang was the Deputy Chief of Security, or at least he was at the moment, who knew how much responsibility he would be shouldered with for this fiasco. His Chief had been killed in the third counterattack, so everything would fall on Freygang. Rufus walked up to them, and Bill introduced them to each other.

“Well you got here just in time, another 10 minutes and we might not have lasted.” There were about half a dozen different emotions fighting for control within that voice, but Rufus chose not to take it as an insult, though many of the Aurors in hearing distance had their hackles rise.

“I’m glad we were able to help. Our scout said that no vaults were broken into, was he correct?”

“So it would appear, they seemed bent on murder and mayhem, not thievery. The vaults have special alarms that tell us when they have been breached, those alarms never went off.”

“Well thank Merlin for that. How many casualties did you sustain?”

“Too many. I am sorry for Dumbledore, for what it’s worth. He died a hero.” That was gushing praise coming from Freygang, who while he rather liked Bill, otherwise had little use for humans in general.

“We lost some good people today, but that fool Voldemort lost more.” He turned to Jenkins.

“How many prisoners do we have?”

“A total of 22 sir, the rest are dead or dying. No trolls are alive from what I can tell.”

Rufus motioned to Travis, and they had a whispered conversation for half a minute. After which, Rufus turned back to Freygang.

“I want Runcorn, Ibbotson, and nine other prisoners at random. You can have the other 11 to question how you see fit. I will give you transcripts of what my half say, in exchange for the same from you, but you must thoroughly question any prisoners you take.” How you see fit left a lot of open territory, and while Freygang was a long way from smiling, he was nodding as if this was satisfactory.

“I can agree to that. And the disposition of my prisoners after we’ve questioned them?”

“Entirely up to you, as long as their bodies don’t wind up on my streets in any way.” Rufus felt that he needed to mollify the goblins somehow, because while he felt that this was in no way his or his peoples’ collective fault, he knew that the goblins would see it as the fault of humanity in general, without any pesky distinctions.

“Agreed. You will have your transcripts no later than tomorrow evening. Thank you for your assistance in this matter.” Rufus had given him what he wanted, so the tough looking goblin girded himself and held out a bony hand for The Minister to shake, which Rufus did. He had Jenkins police up his 11 prisoners, the rest would officially be labeled as killed in the battle, and their wounded and dead.

Harry had gone over to Arthur, who was being helped to his feet by Fred and George, Bill having wrapped a magical bandage tight around his father’s bum leg.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m alive Harry, that’s enough for now. Alive thanks to you I might mention, getting to be a habit.” He smiled that Arthur smile of his, quite relieved to still be alive after a pair of near death experiences. It had also hit him that he had a lot of sons risking their lives as well, and his eyes had been busy searching them for signs of injury, but none of them seemed to have a scratch on them.

“We’ll just have to keep you out of the next battle is all, that’ll take care of it.” He was unsmiling as he said this, but his tone of voice was soft. He turned and went back to Dumbledore, kneeling beside the body, and when he spoke, it was almost a whisper.

“What the hell did you do that for? After everything we’ve said to each other, and done to each other, how could you? Was this your final measure of abuse? Are you trying to make me feel guilty for the rest of my life?” Travis had come up behind him, and while Harry had heard the footsteps, he didn’t turn around. Travis knew that Harry was at something of a crossroads now, and figured that it was his duty as friend and mentor to yank him off of it as soon as heavenly possible.

“He believed in that Prophecy Harry, that’s why he did it. He wants Voldemort gone so much he was willing to die to protect you.”

“I never wanted that, I don’t want anyone dying for me.” Said very vehemently, and Travis’ reply was devastating in it’s logic.

“Haven’t we always agreed that Albus Dumbledore never much cared about what you wanted? Why should this be any different? He felt that your part to play was the most important. He would have sacrificed all of us to keep you alive.” Travis was rocked more by Bones death than Dumbledore’s, but he put it aside for Harry’s sake, for the moment anyway.

“That’s insane.”

“It’s reality my friend, we have to deal with the reality of the world with which we’re presented, or we will all go mad.”

“I’m sorry about Bones, she was a great woman.” Harry stood up, and turned away from the former Headmaster that he could hardly bear to look at, though for vastly different reasons than in past months.

“Yes she was, I learned quite a bit from her over the years. She and Rufus made me the man I am today.....and my wife of course. C’mon Harry, let’s get Dumbledore out of here.” They levitated them, now both feeling exhausted after their exertions, but feeling a duty.

Back at Hogwarts:

The wireless sets were still surrounded, as the Gryffindor Common Room was pretty much full to the bursting with its students, and Westbrook, McGonagall, and Hagrid too. Remus came up to the DOM’s just as Shivers saw the League and Aurors come out of the bank. Somehow, he had been left in place by the Aurors outside, who perhaps felt that the public had a right to know what was going on at the place of most of their money.

“The Aurors are now leaving the bank, they have what looks to be about a dozen prisoners, the Death Eaters all have their masks on still. Look, here’s Minister Scrimgeour, he and Senior Auror Sanford Jenkins appear to be levitating a body.....oh my, it’s Madam Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.” Remus sucked in some breath there, causing everyone to notice that he was there. He and Bones had not been good friends, but he had a healthy respect for her talents, and her abilities to be a brake on Rufus. Shivers continued:

“And here comes Wizengamot Head Arthur Weasley, he’s limping pretty badly, there’s a bandage on his leg. He’s surrounded by his sons Bill, Fred, and George, who all seem to be unhurt. Full disclosure folks, I was Bill’s roommate for seven years at Hogwarts, and there’s no finer man anywhere.” The relief of the faces of the DOM’s was very, very noticeable to anyone watching them, and everyone had at least one eye on them. Now the question was, where’s Harry? That was answered after another minute of Shivers identifying important people.

“And here’s Harry Potter, covered in blood it appears, though he seems to be unhurt. He’s with Head Auror Travis Biller, they’re very good friends from what I understand, and they’re levitating a body

too.....oh no, that's Albus Dumbledore." Shivers voice caught in his throat, and he was quiet for a moment.

And there was not a sound in Gryffindor after he said that, all of them hoping that it wasn't true. McGonagall had tears coming out of her eyes at the very thought of it, and Hagrid just sat there like a stone, in shock.

Apparently Rufus had come over to Shivers, recognizing him, and had a brief statement, made up as he went along of course.

"People of magical Britain. It is my very great burden to tell you that we have lost Amelia Bones and Albus Dumbledore. They, along with nine other members of The Dark Force Defense League, perished in battle with the Death Eaters of the so called Lord Voldemort, but they inflicted far more damage than we sustained. Our goblin friends at Gringotts suffered heavy casualties, but have informed me that not one vault was entered illegally. I repeat, your Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts, are all where they should be. I will have a more detailed announcement soon, thank you Coyote."

"And there you have it listeners, straight from the man at the top. This is Coyote Shivers, and you're listening to The Wizarding Wireless Network."

Remus walked over to McGonagall and pulled her into a hug, as she finally let loose her sobs, not caring that it was Dumbledore's replacement doing the comforting. This was by far the most non-anger emotion any Gryffindors had ever seen from her, and in a perverse way they liked her better for it, it made her seem more human to them. The DOM's, while aghast at Dumbledore dying, and very curious as to how, were beyond relieved that no Weasley had perished, or from the sound of it, any of their tutors from July. Ginny stood up.

"Professor Westbrook, I need to go the bathroom, are we free to go now?"

“Go ahead Ginny.” Now that there was no more danger, Westbrook had no problem with any of them leaving her sight. Indeed she herself left The Common Room a minute later, wanting to floo Travis and find out what was going on.

Ginny made a beeline for the trunk, calculating as she went what time it must be over in Michigan. She just prayed that Dobby or Winky would be in one of the trunks.

They were in Sophie’s as it happened, quietly debating between them the proper time to alert Sophie and the others about all the hullabaloo. Ginny assured them that she would do it, and so Winky went up into the Sophie/Reiko room, and shook them both awake. They followed her down into the trunk, where they were very surprised to find Ginny waiting for them.

“Hi there, sorry to get you out of bed, but there have been some happenings back home.”

Sophie and Reiko were hardly surprised anymore by shenanigans at any meeting Harry was involved in back in Britain, and after Ginny assured them that Shivers had said that Harry was walking under his own power and using magic at the same time, they stopped their brief moments of worry.

“We would have told you sooner, but Sarah was watching us like a hawk, she suspects that we know how to get out of the castle, though probably not how. She wouldn’t let us leave her sight.”

“Ginny, how do you feel about Dumbledore being killed?” Reiko asked this, but Sophie wanted to know just as much.

“Is it safe to say that Harry told you about the twins’ perspective?” The one that advocated at least thinking about taking care of Dumbledore themselves.

“Very safe.”

“Dumbledore was a great man, very powerful and wise. But there was something about Voldemort that stumped him, I don’t know what it was and I probably never will now. But hearing that Prophecy did something to Dumbledore and he never recovered. Harry’s been paying for it ever since. I’m glad that that part of the drama has been settled once and for all, but I didn’t want him to have to die to do it.” Very wise and well thought out, clearly Ginny had been musing on this for a time.

“I wonder how he died?”

They speculated on that for a minute, then Ginny said that she had to get back, or people would wonder. They made plans to get together, the E-gang, that night after Harry got back. It was assumed that the Rob Graham escort service to and from was back on, and they were correct, so it was likely to be a few hours. Sophie decided that Murray should probably know, in case her sources hadn’t informed her yet.

Murray, in fact, had barely gotten out of bed, and had missed the telephone call that would have informed her of the Gringotts drama, Doc Neil being at a medical conference in Houston. The message light on her answering machine was blinking as Sophie filled her in on what little she knew, pretending that it was Dobby that had come and told her. The Headmistress took all of this in with a bit of a sigh, and brought up something that the three younger women had forgotten to touch on.

“He’s going to have to go to those funerals you know.”

That hit Sophie like a ton of bricks, and she fervently hoped that either Voldemort had lost enough troops to make a funeral assault not worth it, or that The Ministry would secure those services tighter than the goblins had secured their bank.

“Can I go with him?”

As soon as Sophie said that, Murray regretted opening her big mouth about the funerals. She knew that she would have to give permission, and that Harry wouldn’t want his girlfriend within 1000 miles of Britain

during those events. She mentally crossed her fingers and let fly with a delay, hoping that Harry would be too tired to kill her after he found out that she had been planting ideas in his girlfriend's head.

"Let's see what the arrangements are first, I'm sure I'll be having a nice conversation with Travis at some point soon, about security. Let me get showered and dressed, I've got some meetings this morning. I'll come get you guys right before lunch and we'll talk about how we're going to handle all of this."

"What do you mean, handle?"

"I mean a lot of emotions are going to be running through him, and as the people that know him best, we have to help him sort them out."

"You're worried about him aren't you?" Shades of Karl Aylesworth all over again, and Murray respected Sophie enough to be straight with her.

"Yes I am."

Back to Great Britain.

Harry and the Weasleys congregated in the shop, where Molly had rushed in as soon as Winky would let her out of The Burrow. She tut-tutted over Arthur's broken leg, and he promised to get to St. Mungo's as soon as everything was sorted out. Rufus appeared after a few minutes, on his way back to The Ministry to sort out the prisoners and their questioning.

"Harry, I'm sure that you won't mind Rob accompanying you on your portkey trip back. We're going to send you on a slightly different route this time, but we can't take any chances with your safety. Our friend in Azkaban, if that's where he is still, will probably not be very happy."

"Fine by me." Said in a neutral tone of voice, but with a resigned state of mind. He supposed he couldn't blame them really, and he was tired enough that he could use some help if it came to a fight,

though Rob had been just as active in the battle as he had been, almost.

“Arthur, I’m going to name Travis as the new Head of the DMLE, and Sanford Jenkins as the new Head Auror, Nelson DeMille will be the new Senior Deputy Head Auror.” Jenkins and Travis, mostly friendly rivals for many years, had come to an understanding with the ascensions of Rufus to power, and Jenkins was the clear choice of all involved, despite DeMille’s longer term of service and outstanding record.

“Sounds good, they’ll do great jobs.” And he meant that, as much as he was nervous about Travis being up one more spot on the line of succession, someone that direct needed some more diplomatic seasoning before being ready for the top job, or so Arthur thought. Given a few different spell trajectories today though, and Amos Diggory could be the new Minister, and nobody really wanted that, as fine an administrator as he was.

“Harry, is it possible that you could sit down with your sister-in-law for a few minutes and give some comments?” Like most, he treated Harry like he was a black-haired Weasley.

“Of course sir.”

That was twice now that Rufus had asked things of Harry that he knew the lad wouldn’t want to do, and twice now that he had quietly agreed without the slightest hesitation. This bothered The Minister on many levels, but he had bigger fish to fry at the moment.

“Good, she’ll be here in a few minutes, Rob will be by in 30 minutes to escort you back, he needs to assemble the necessary portkeys. I’ll have word to you about the funerals as soon as the plans are set, though you don’t have to come if you don’t want to. You all did very well in there, very well indeed. Our goblin friends owe us more than a few favors right now, and Voldemort will find it a lot harder to move money around.”

In fact Voldemort had been planning this for months, and his top minions had slowly been draining their vaults to a relatively bare minimum. The goblins had noticed this of course, but had not caught on to what the bad man had intended, obviously. Voldemort's money was now run through nominees of nominees, none of them in Great Britain. Still, the slightest inconvenience to him was worth it to Rufus.

Rufus proceeded to The Leaky Cauldron, where he quickly cut a deal with the giants that had holed up in there. He convinced them that a switch in sides was in order, seeing as how Voldemort's plan had led them into slaughter, plus he threw in a nice financial package as well. None of the survivors were high up in the giant hierarchy, but all of them agreed that working for Rufus was better than being killed, and The Minister had quietly brought up half of his Auror force in order to persuade them. The giants talked amongst themselves for a few minutes, aided by a nervous Tom the barman serving them a few pints, and came to the only logical conclusion:

So The Ministry now had it's own crew of giants, and The Minister and his new DMLE Head would immediately plot and plan ways as to how to deploy them. Ideally they would be put at Hogwarts as guards, but they decided that Remus' life had enough stress in it right now, so they chose to wait until the funerals. They were semi-compassionate men after all.

Back at WWW, Harry sat down with Alicia and answered all of her considerable number of questions, though Gus McCrae did not make an appearance in the shop. This was Harry's first ever official, on the record, interview with The Daily Prophet, though he had been quoted after Snape Night a couple of years previous, and after his last set-to with Dumbledore. He only tolerated it because of Alicia, and probably gave a lot more information and insight to her than he would have for some stranger, or even for McCrae, who was still very much living up to his end of their agreement.

Arthur, Bill, Fred, and George all contributed their thoughts to the article as well, and Alicia, while glad that her various in-laws had gone through mostly unscathed, was nevertheless overjoyed at the potential story she had here. Harry and the others were surprisingly gentle on Dumbledore for the record, focusing more on the good,

while barely touching on the bad in their various relationships with him. They were full of praise for his courage, and Harry made it plain that Dumbledore had died a hero.

Alicia left as Rob was entering the shop, it had remained open the entire time, though no customers had come in. As Harry made ready to leave, Arthur put his arm around him.

“Thank you again Harry.”

“I’d do anything for you Arthur, you know that.” Molly’s eyes were watering again upon hearing that, while Arthur’s voice choked a slight bit as well.

“I do my boy, I’m proud to call you family.”

“Likewise. I’ll see you at the funerals.”

“You’re going to come? I would imagine that your people over there are going to try and talk you out of it.”

“I wouldn’t bet you any money on that, but how can I not show? Love him or hate him, and I’m guilty of both at times, Dumbledore saved my life. There’s no way I could disrespect that by not showing up to his memorial, no way.” He, like so many others, had such a healthy respect for Bones that it never would have occurred to him not to go to hers.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“You thought you were going to have to talk me into it, weren’t you?”

“No Harry, not at all.”

“Right.”

“The Minister would have done the persuading for me, while I remain in the back as the good guy.” Arthur, despite a dull ache in his leg, was grinning, and Harry flashed a brief smile.

“Anyway, Rob and I should get going. Be good you lot, I’ll see you soon.” Everyone gave him a hug, despite the fact that he had not washed the blood off of himself as yet. No one wanted to bring it up, figuring that he had a reason for it.

He did, not that he could put a finger on just what it was. He and Rob went out back to the portkey area, and were soon off, on a slightly different run than usual. This time it was Brest, France, Rabat, Morocco, Caracas, Venezuela, Miami, and then to Boston. Harry still saw very little other than the floo stations, and their breaks were only 30 minutes at a crack this time, since he was older. It would still be a couple of years before he would be able to get it down to 10 minutes.

Harry and Rob got to Jacobson’s office in relatively short order and without incident, but the American Head Auror was not in the office quite yet, so they floored right into Murray’s office from there, only to find that she was not there either. They walked out into the hall and Graham looked at Harry.

“Well?”

“I’m sure you would love to see the Cortez Lounge.” Said without a trace of a smile, though the tone of voice was friendly enough. Rob had said very little over the course of the trip, correctly assuming that Harry had some issues that he needed to work out on his own.

“Lead on.” Graham, as described before, was a very large man, who had seen a lot of action in his relatively brief Auror career. But the expression on Harry’s face left him with a bit of a chill. Nevertheless, he followed Harry down to the third floor and Cortez. There they found the gang, and Murray, all huddled in a corner. As they walked in the door, they passed Joe Clancy on his way to the library. He paused as he saw Harry, totally unaware of the day’s events, he had not even noticed his Headmistress in the Lounge.

“Um, Harry, you’ve got some blood on you.” The two of them had been getting along much better in the last year, especially given that they never spoke, so Harry’s reply was not as snotty as it might read.

“How bout that Joe.”

Clancy took stock of Harry’s expression, and beat a hasty retreat, though Harry would sort of apologize later on. The pair of Brits walked up to the gang and Murray, none of whom really gasped, this kind of being par for the course by now. Sophie leapt up first, and didn’t seem to care about getting dried blood on her clothes as she hugged him tightly.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m alive, I don’t know about okay.” That brought her up short a bit, and the blood on his and Rob’s clothes was having something of an effect on the others as well.

“Was anyone else we know……” She trailed off, knowing that the odds were pretty good. Harry didn’t know that she had been briefed, and gave his news out accordingly.

“Bones died, and Arthur will probably have a limp for awhile, but that’s mostly it.” Bones had not been intimately involved in the rest of the gang’s tutoring during July, but they had all met her and talked with her a little, liking her straightforward professionalism. He waited for their slight gasps to end.

“And Dumbledore is gone. He stepped in front of a Killing Curse aimed for my back.” That was the ‘how’, as far as Dumbledore’s death went, and it went off like a bomb.

No one knew quite what to say here, even Murray couldn’t find a voice, and she had liked Dumbledore even less than Harry had for the most part. Rob coughed a little, and everyone looked at him.

“We won the battle, so they didn’t die in vain. Nothing was taken from Gringotts, at least that we know of, but a lot of goblins were

killed. We only lost a dozen or so, while the Death Eaters lost almost 100.”

That would have cheered them up a lot if not for the expression on Harry’s face. It was a mixture of haunted, combined with some rage, and a slight helping of satisfaction of a job well done. They had gotten to know his post-battle looks quite well over the last year and change, but this was something new.

“I killed Umbridge by the way.” No trace of happiness in that tone, and Rob again expounded for the rapidly gathering crowd.

“She was holding Arthur, threatening to kill him if Harry didn’t lay down his wand. Harry did, and then managed to get her anyway. If you don’t mind me saying Harry, I would gladly have done the job for you.” Rob’s sister had been a Seventh Year student under Umbridge, and while she had no Cursed Quill scars, she had not found the experience to be a pleasant one.

“I don’t mind at all Rob.”

Murray had finally had enough, not much caring for Docile Harry, and motioned for everyone to get up.

“Harry, I would love to see this trunk that I’ve heard so much about. Let’s all go in there and have a chat. Rob, please join us if you have the time.”

“I do ma’am, thank you.” He wouldn’t miss this for the world, his girlfriend would just have to hold dinner until he got back.

“My name is Joanne, please use it. Come along folks.” Said in a tone that would brook no argument, and Harry the Agreeable went along without comment. He didn’t even put up a fuss about Murray going into the trunk, and Sophie had to go last in order to call to Dobby and have him go warn everyone else with a trunk not to come to Great Lakes for the next little while.

Once they got down in the living room, Murray took control.

“This is one time where I’m not eager to see a pensieve memory of what happened, but if you would like to tell us about it.....” She figured he would, and was not disappointed.

“Okay, if you want to hear it.” So he did tell them, with help from Rob. He talked about his and Travis’ setup of Umbridge, of his uses of Avada Kedavra, and what he felt when he saw that Dumbledore had died for him. It took an hour, more time than the actual events in fact, and Harry was feeling a lot better after talking like that.

“I needed that ma’am, thanks.”

“That’s why I didn’t want the pensieve, I thought that seeing it all again might not be of the most help to you.”

“I don’t want to see it again, I don’t know if I can bear to. Arthur with a wand at his throat, Bones going down when it just as easily could have been me.....and that idiot and his stupid Prophecy.”

Drew then asked what they were all thinking, in a very quiet voice, one that almost couldn’t be heard.

“Would you rather be dead Harry?”

Harry’s reply was gentle.

“You’ve never had anyone die for you Drew, or you would not have asked that question. I now have three at the very least: Mum, Dad, and Dumbledore, and probably Sirius too since he came to fix my blunder. Three people that I loved, and one that I revered for a long time in my life. It’s a hard burden to bear, even though with Mum, Dad, and Dumbledore, there was really nothing I could do to stop them.” That did not really answer the question, but no one wanted to press Harry on it, not while he seemed to be coming out of his funk. For his part, Harry knew that only Ginny would truly understand how he felt, since Percy had done for her what Dumbledore had just done for him.

“Are you feeling better now?”

“I am Professor Murray, thank you.”

“Do you mind if I do something?”

“What?”

“Scourgify!” Right at the dried blood that was all over Harry’s ‘F’ Weasley sweater. It took a few tries, but it eventually all came off, there had even been a little on his trainers.

“The Cutting Curses are very effective, but very messy. Now you look okay.”

“Thank you ma’am.”

“Now before I leave you folks to yourselves, there is one other matter we have to talk about.”

“The funerals.” He had figured that this would come up eventually.

“Right in one, as you like to say. There’s no way I can turn down your request to go, so I won’t pretend that that’s an option. I imagine it will be in the morning over there, whatever day they lay it on, so little class time missed, only some of your sleep time. That said, I don’t want this entire group to be in Hogwarts castle if it doesn’t have to be. Graduation Day is one thing, besides which you won’t be under my authority anymore, but I don’t want you people becoming a conversation piece over there. But if you want to take someone with you, it can only be Sophie.” Well it could be any one person, or so Murray thought, but there was no real choice there.

“She can come if she wants to.” More docility, though Sophie wasn’t arguing. She didn’t think she heard him right at first though.

“You’d better not try to stop.....hang on.” Everyone laughed, even Harry managed a somewhat normal smile.

“You see, I’m agreeable for once in my life and you roll right past.”

“This had better not be your ironic sense of humor.”

“I’m too tired to be funny right now darling, but it would help to have you there.” Tired was right, Harry estimated that he had fired off at least 30 Avada Kedavras this day, plus dozens of other major spells and curses. He was grateful that he was back in his safe haven in Michigan, where nothing ever happened but classes, homework, pranks, and his friends. A bit boring compared to Britain, but for Harry it was the best kind of relaxation.

Murray stood up, her goals had been satisfied, and Harry seemed to be closing in on normal.

“I’m glad that that’s settled. Harry, if you need anything at all, including to use the telephone to get in touch with Travis or your Minister, please feel free to come by.”

“Thank you ma’am, and I appreciate you taking the time today.”

“I was glad to do it, now get some rest, you’ve had a long day already and it’s barely started over here. I’ll let you know if anything new arises.” She smiled at them all, and took her leave, startling the crap out of Rick and his girlfriend as they came upon her, exiting the trunk, Rob close behind her, as he got started on his return trip. The gang followed her soon after, going down to breakfast for a rare time on a Saturday morning, after Harry had sent a message to the DOM’s, saying that they should come over after their own dinner, after things hopefully settled down at their school.

Dobby came back with a report that Hogwarts was still in a state of shock, with Dumbledore’s passing. Remus had still not taken the castle out of lockdown, and was threatening to leave it up all weekend, Quidditch practices be damned. The lockdown procedure allowed the floo in the Headmaster’s office to be used to connect with the outside world, but at a price of Remus needing to open the outer door of his office himself physically, rather than saying come in, to

unlock it. He was wary of Voldemort's reaction to another decimation of his prized attacks.

The gang had meant to go back to the trunk, but were waylaid by Marty, Keisha, and Anna, who had heard very little about the Gringott's thing, not being able to jam their way to the front earlier, and now they wanted to hear about it up close and firsthand. Harry surprised the others by obliging them, and even acted out the attacks on the giants for them. This was something that the gang was noticing more and more: How much of a soft touch Harry was with the Little Three, as he tended to call them, even if Marty was now half an inch taller than he was. They were still in the Cortez Lounge when Murray brought in a pair of visitors. A pair of goblins. Harry immediately stood up and tried to look as friendly as possible. Having washed the blood off surely helped.

One was familiar to Harry, because it was his account manager Fortrap, who was very high up in the Gringotts hierarchy. He doubled as Bill Weasley's immediate boss, Bill no longer being a Curse Breaker. He was accompanied by a slightly older goblin that seemed to be in charge. Fortrap spoke first:

"Hello Harry, it is good to see you again."

"I'm glad to see you well Fortrap."

"Well is a relative term at the moment, but I am alive, thanks in no small part to you. This is Dermtrak, who is one of my colleagues on our Board of Directors." The older goblin nodded at Harry with something akin to respect, and spoke.

"Our surveillance apparatus inform us that you and your partners were the first to reach the scene today." Not the opening that Harry had expected.

"I believe we did yes, but that was more to do with us not wearing robes and being the fastest runners." Dermtrak seemed not to care about such semantics, and had little use for modesty.

“You were the first on the scene to a fight that you technically had no truck with, and Gringotts is not ungrateful. We are prepared to double the interest on your company’s vault for the next five years, and for that same time period, we will supply you with two of our goblins to assist you in your manufacturing of pranks, the workers we have in mind for this are skilled at such processes. We will pay their salaries, and they will work the standard 50 hour, six day workweek. Is this satisfactory?”

Harry didn’t know quite what to say at first, but knew that there was only one right answer here, with a caveat.

“It is most satisfactory, as long as you understand that all you really had to do was say thank you.”

“We just did. I am coming to you because your partners appear to be in your home right now, and we cannot access it, you have it very well concealed. Your new employees will report to your partners at 8:00 a.m. sharp on Monday morning. Of course we will guarantee their reliability and trustworthiness.”

“I’ll be sure to let them know, and again, thank you.” Always be polite to a goblin, Bill Weasley had taught him, and it was paying off here, as Dermtrak smiled for the first time.

“You are a marvelous fighter Harry Potter, worthy of our complete respect. How you got that way spending five years in that school is beyond our comprehension, but there are greater mysteries in life that need to be solved first.” He looked at his colleague, who proceeded to the next piece of business.

“As I believe you have been told Harry, you are Dumbledore’s sole heir. He has given much money to Hogwarts over the years, as his inventions and patents made him a spectacularly wealthy man, he comes from no family money himself, so Hogwarts has long been taken care of. You are the only one listed in his will, and I believe Minister Scrimgeour drugged most of the details out of him, so you likely have a rough idea of how much he left you.” How the goblins knew that piece of information was another of life’s mysteries.

“I know I’m supposed to say that I don’t want the money.”

“It is the standard response, yes, especially given the beyond complicated history that the two of you had.”

“Just get me the paperwork and I’ll sign it.” He knew of a couple of good charities, muggle and magical, that could use a million or so Galleons.

“I will have it to your partners by Monday morning in Great Britain, though you need not return it until the weekend next, when I believe that the memorial services are to be held. You are now the ninth wealthiest family in magical Britain, in spite of the fact that you are the sole remaining Potter living there.” There were distant, distant cousins living in New Zealand and Australia, but they had never been candidates to take one year old Harry in, for various reasons. Both James and his father had been only children, so we are talking many times removed here.

“Interesting.” He wasn’t sure what else to say, and Fortrap seemed to understand that.

“Well we must be getting on our way. Have your man Dobby bring the paperwork back to us as soon as you can, but again, there is no real need to hurry unless you’re planning to buy a Quidditch team.”

“Thank you Fortrap, I’ll see you at the services.” The goblins nodded at the humans, and took their leave. Murray was tempted to make a joke about the library needing an upgrade, but felt that Harry might feel that he was obligated to do it or something, so she followed the goblins back to her office. They had done her the courtesy of giving a five minute description of the battle from their perspective, and she was even more appalled than before. She would go on to have a brief telephone conversation with Travis, and they agreed that Harry needed to be watched a little more closely than usual.

Not surveillance watching, Joanne just assumed that he scanned for those kinds of things on a regular basis, assuming correctly. No, they

were talking about psychological watching, she had the same list of psychologists names that Karl Aylesworth had in mind, and Joanne Murray decided that if there was one more incident in Britain, she would have one of them come in.

Eventually the gang shook itself loose of the Little Three, though not until after lunch, so that they could get together with the DOM's and company. By now Karl and Lisa had heard about everything, and they joined the teenagers as well, for much the same reasons as Murray had earlier.

The twins had filled the Hogwarts people in on the particulars of the day, and Hermione in particular was aghast at some of the details.

“What made you jump on the giant's back?” That she had heard about on the WWN.

“It seemed like the best idea at the time, and you gotta admit that it worked pretty well.” And they could, the twins would be telling that story to shop customers for a long time afterward.

Lee, whose hand scars were just as deep as Harry's, was especially interested in one person.

“How did it feel to kill Umbridge? Righteous, right?”

“At the time? I didn't think twice about it, she was a Death Eater with a wand pointed at me. Those people deserve what they get. I did feel a little guilty afterward though, it was like killing a mentally retarded person or something. I mean did she really think I was going to lower my wand and let her kill me? I'm serious, Crabbe and Goyle, the dumbest people I've ever met, would have more sense than that.” Of the people in the room, only Reiko's parents and Marie had not at least seen Umbridge in person, but even they couldn't fathom anyone expecting Harry to just surrender. Especially Harry.

Hermione, knowing nothing about the funk that Harry had been in after the battle, the twins had chosen to keep it quiet, asked the inevitable Dumbledore question.

“Harry, have you reconciled yourself with Dumbledore’s death?”

“I don’t really know what you mean by reconciled. Do I feel guilty about it? Sure, but Travis said something that I’ve been thinking about more and more over the last few hours: Dumbledore believed in that Prophecy, and he believed in it so much that he was willing to die for it. On the one hand, I think that’s a bit ludicrous, especially given that it came from Sybil Trelawney. But on the other hand, it was a genuine belief, and it was his life to sacrifice.” Sophie was beyond relieved to hear this, it meant that her boyfriend was not going to be putting on a hair shirt anytime soon.

The logician in Hermione couldn’t resist one follow up question.

“Didn’t that overriding belief put you with the Dursleys for all those years?”

“But that was my life he was toying with then Hermione, though part of me can respect him a little for sticking to that belief until the end. I think after July and our meeting, any apology would have been wasted, I don’t think I would have believed it, probably I would have thought of it as some kind of ploy.”

“Did you ever forgive him?”

“For the Dursleys? No, because he was never sorry. He believed he was right, I believed that he was wrong. I won in the end, but it was costly.” He had not told the DOM’s that he was Dumbledore’s heir upon finding that fact out, being rather worried about Ron’s reaction to him inheriting many more millions of Galleons.

“What about for your life at Hogwarts?”

“I’ll never forgive him for Snape, let’s put it that way. Remove Snape from Hogwarts for those five years, and things would not have been that bad. I mean I know there were cursed diaries, Philosopher Stones, Dementors, and the like. Those were specific things that occurred specifically, if that makes any sense. Snape was daily,

weekly, yearly. He was a drain on me at times that I did not really need a drain.”

Ron was looking very contemplative, as if this theory had never really occurred to him before. Snape hadn't really liked him either, though that was more of a function of him being Harry's best friend, Snape had had no problems with Bill, Charlie, and Percy in years previous. But now that he chewed on it, it made such perfect sense that he was a bit irate that he hadn't come up with himself. Neville for one was nodding in wholehearted agreement.

“I hear you Harry, that git made Hogwarts a lot less fun and educational for me too. I never got to yell at Dumbledore about it like you did, but I know that Gran sent him more than a few owls about Snape. All to no avail of course, until you settled him in your house that night.”

This started a Snape bashing show, and the next couple of hours had our heroes going to town on the dead Potions Master, with some shots at Dumbledore, McGonagall, and even Hagrid a little bit thrown in there too. It was interesting for Harry to note that Hermione joined in on the McG criticism as well, given that if McGonagall liked any student under her care, it was Hermione, she had always been the favorite. But here she was, getting her digs in just like all the other Hogwarts people, himself as much as anyone.

Harry was, in many ways, fascinated at the change that had come over Hermione ever since he had left Hogwarts. He had been right, or so he thought, in that the burden of their adventures had been just as much on her as it had been on him. Hermione liked the balance of a well ordered world around her, probably from a life spent growing up with dentists as parents, and being intimately involved in every Hogwarts drama for five years had upset that balance.

Oh there was still drama at school obviously, but nothing close to what had gone on while he was there. He often wondered if his friendship with her, and by extension Ron since they were together, would have survived his Sixth Year in Britain. The Americans were noncommittal whenever he brought this up, feeling that they were hardly objective. He had briefly talked about it with Neville back in

July, and the other man had agreed that while it would have taken another huge event to sunder the Trio if Harry had stayed.....well such events seemed to occur with frightening regularity at Hogwarts, at least a Hogwarts with Harry in it.

The Daily Prophet's Sunday edition was basically half coverage of the battle, and the other half a dual obituary for Bones and Dumbledore, with a half page each thrown in for the other nine League members, all retired Aurors or mid-level Ministry types, that had died in battle. Much was made of Harry, Fred, and George charging in like they did, at least from the journalists not named Alicia Weasley, and business at the shop picked up considerably, making the twins glad that they had their two new employees . Harry had probably saved himself a few would-be Howlers by his praise of his former nemesis, as while Alicia did not gloss over the differences between Dumbledore and Harry, she managed to imply that they had been largely patched up before the battle.

Not true, but Harry would not be writing to her or McCrae, demanding a retraction. At least not after Drew and Sophie talked him out of it anyway. Drew's advice was:

“Let them think that you two were at least civil to one another now, otherwise people will think you're like Snape with your father, not letting it go even when the other guy is dead.” Words to live by, and Harry immediately crumpled up the parchment he had grabbed, mentally patting himself on the back yet again for dragooning Drew into the gang. He wouldn't even say anything to Alicia a few nights later when they all had a WWW partners meeting at The Hollow.

The rest of the week would be nothing but aftermath, at least in magical Britain. There would be no mass exodus of Gringotts customers, though they did lose a few accounts. The promotions of Travis Biller and Sanford Jenkins were treated with more or less a 'well of course those two got the jobs' mentality, though a few people wondered at the closest friend of The Minister being his DMLE Head. That view was counterbalanced by those who thought it was a good idea to have those two offices work in close concert with each other.

The funerals would be the following Saturday, on Valentine's Day no less, ironic in that Dumbledore and Bones had both never married. For security reasons it would be held at Hogwarts, the only really secure place left in magical Britain, at least one that could hold the number of guests wanting to attend. The guest list would be invitation only though, and would include eight Americans: Sophie, Head Auror Mike Jacobson, President Michael Chabon, Hollie Baylor, and the Heads of the four schools: Joanne Murray, Robert Clary, James Morrison, and Beau Shupe. They and Harry would all be taking the portkey over together, leaving at midnight on the east coast in order to get there in due time. The Flackter Alley trip, usually on the second Saturday of the month in Februarys, had of necessity been moved back a week because of Valentine's Day.

Harry joked that he was giving Sophie the perfect Valentine's Day date: A funeral, every girl's dream.

Sophie just rolled her eyes, though she was grateful that his sense of humor was coming back. They had an uneventful week of classes, other than the first mass duel of the term in Basic Combat. This was another five on five contest, set on a farm this time, outside in the snow.

It was five on five because Ripley had Harry sit this one out, and act as observer and alternate referee. They had had two mass duels back in the Fall, with Drew and Liesel Matthews sitting out a time each, and now it was Harry's turn.

And it would be Harry's turn the next time as well, at least according to Ripley. He felt that Harry's recent battle experience set him so far above the others that it would be very hard for his team to lose, Harry's teams had won both mock battles back in Fall, the last one rather easily against a stacked team of the other best students.

There was also one other factor: Ripley did not think it out of the question that at some point Harry might forget it was a game and start having some flashbacks to his real combat times. Ripley had seen it a time or two during his Lycan fighting days, when there were Aurors who had seen so much fighting and combat that they couldn't really let go of it. Oh he knew that Harry was not at that point yet, but

the Defense teacher was going to make sure that he didn't get there anytime soon either.

Saturday, February 14, 1998

Hogwarts Great Hall.

8:30 am GMT

The Great Hall had been emptied of its tables, and the benches were realigned as pews, with many added, as the room was quickly filling up with people. On the guest list were all of the Hogwarts students who wished to come, as well as Ministry types, Diagon Alley businesspeople, and many foreign dignitaries, Michael Chabon was not the only foreign head of government to be present, and all of the Heads of the various magical schools around the world had made the journey, save one: Bravos Stankovic, Karakoff's successor at Durmstrang, who had sent a rude note saying that he was busy this entire weekend and could not spare the time. Stankovic was considered to be, more or less, Karakoff's dumber, more arrogant protégé from back in the day, and his non-attendance was considered to be no real loss, however much they would have liked to have had 'perfect attendance'.

Harry, Sophie, and the other Americans had arrived in time for breakfast, and Remus had hosted them all in the Headmaster's Quarters, which only Harry and Joanne had ever been in before, and neither of them since the job change. It was very spare for the most part, aside from the usual Dark Detectors that were in every Defense type's office. The meal was somewhat awkward for the most part, as most of the Americans were still finding it hard to believe that they were sitting in the office of a Lycan Headmaster at the flagship school of magical Europe. This was not a visit that could be done quid pro quo either, however much Remus wound up putting them at ease. Harry and Sophie excused themselves part way through, and wandered up to Gryffindor Tower. They got there right as a gang of First Years came through the door, but the Fat Lady spotted Harry all the same.

“Well, well, I wondered if I would ever see you again Harry Potter.” It was a friendly tone of voice, but not overly warm.

“Probably for the last time ma’am, I just wanted one last look.” He and Sophie were in their dress robes, both of them hoping that this already uncomfortable conversation wouldn’t last much longer.

“Well go on in then, your friends have not come out yet this morning.”

“Thanks, it was good to see you again.” Sophie gave him an elbow in the back to get him moving, and winced as she made contact with Harry’s dragon hide vest, which he had tried to insist that she wear, but eventually wore himself when she would have none of it. She had wondered at the danger inherent at a funeral with a carefully chosen guest list, but Harry said that he was live because of this vest, and preferred to wear it whenever danger was even the slightest possibility.

There were no paintings of this kind at Great Lakes, though talking paintings were in most old money pureblood homes in America, the only ones Sophie had ever seen had been at Jonas’. She had stared at them all throughout the walk up to Gryffindor, and had been working up to wondering why Harry didn’t have any in his trunk, as much as he liked art. They got upstairs to find that the Common Room was slowly filling up with students heading down for a quick breakfast before the funerals. A few had already been down, and were in their dress robes already, today would be double duty for the Hogwarts dress robes as well, as Remus had not wanted to disrupt their routines too much, and had declined to cancel the Valentine’s Day dance that was to be held.

Neville and Ron were both by the fire, wearing their finery, and apparently waiting for Hermione and Ginny to come down. They spotted Harry and Sophie and got up smiling, this was their first time seeing Sophie in dress robes, and both of them appreciated the view.

“Oy, took you long enough didn’t it?”

“I was too busy playing referee in there Ron, at least none of our American brethren tried to curse Remus on sight.”

“You the diplomat, I must be dreaming.”

“Everyone keeps saying things like that.” Harry was laughing though, as Luna came through the portrait door, Neville kept her supplied with the latest passwords so she never had to wait.

“Hello you two, was there any carnage in the Headmaster’s Office?” Luna sounded a bit eager to hear about any, in that spacey voice of hers, and Harry and Sophie both started giggling. They didn’t get a chance to reply though, as students started coming up to them, curious about the now famous Sophie, the one who had snatched The Boy Who Lived and kept him in America.

And away from the Gryffindor Quidditch Team. Ravenclaw was slaughtering them in the House Cup race too, but no one brought that up. Those that came up were very friendly, for many of them it was the first American that they had ever met, all the students that Murray had taught during her year were long graduated.

Harry did not dare leave Sophie alone with them, as she answered a lot of Great Lakes questions, so a trip to his old dorm room was clearly not going to happen. Speaking of his old dorm room, Dean and Seamus now came down the stairs from it. Seamus gave them a friendly wave, he had gotten along very well with the Americans during the Harry/Neville birthday party, but he didn’t come over. That was because Dean was glowering at Harry, he was having Howler visions at present, though Harry had done nothing to him since. Well, until now, as he waved to him.

“Hi there Dean, good to see you!”

There was some light snickering among the crowd around Harry and Sophie, but Dean chose not to rise to the bait, leaving without saying anything. Seamus quickly walked over and said a hurried hello to both of them, then followed his mate out the door, they weren’t

waiting for Lavender it seemed. Sophie just patted Harry on the shoulder.

“You just couldn’t resist that, could you?”

“He got off light as far as I’m concerned.” More snickering could be heard, during the Harry Howler campaign of 1996, no Gryffindors had gotten any, so they knew they were immune more or less.

Hermione and Ginny were down a few minutes later, and the lot of them gave Sophie an hour long tour of Hogwarts, showing her all the cool places, and even some not so cool places like the dungeons and the bathroom where The Chamber of Secrets was. They did not, unfortunately for Sophie, run into Moaning Myrtle, which greatly disappointed her. Ron was happy to repeat all the stories about her though, as they made their way to the Great Hall. Seats had been saved for them by Molly and Arthur, who were sitting with Luna’s father and what seemed like most of Neville’s family, along with Bill, Fleur, and the rest of the Weasleys.

Not surprisingly, for a government run event, things did not start on time, as people were still filing in the door as the 11:00 am start time rolled around. One of those people was McGonagall, and as Harry happened to be on the aisle, she stopped when she saw him.

“Harry.” Said in a polite tone of voice that Harry was happy to mimic.

“Minerva.”

“Those were some very kind words you said about Albus in The Daily Prophet.”

“They were all true, such as they were.”

“It was one of his great regrets that you and he had not reconciled.”

“Maybe in the next life, I’ll go up there with an open mind I hope.”

She nodded, and stuck out her hand, not at all reluctantly, as a thunderstruck Harry managed to shake it before a delay caused her to think him rude.

It turned out that all of the Hogwarts teachers passed him by, and only Hagrid said nothing or gestured nothing to Harry. The half giant did not even look down, not that Harry minded.

At 11:20, Rufus began the service.

“Ladies and Gentleman, we are gathered here to remember two giants of our society: Amelia Bones, and Albus Dumbledore.”

Arthur leaned over to whisper to Harry:

“I wonder what Voldemort is thinking about all of this?”

End Chapter

Author's Note: More of my casting ideas: I've been watching the LOTR films a lot lately, and I've decided that Sean Bean would make a splendid Travis Biller. Back in 1998, where we are in the story now, Bean would have been 39, only a few years older than Travis, who is a year younger than The Marauders and Snape. Of course Snape is played beyond brilliantly by one of the world's finest actors, who happens to be approaching 60 in real life, so a few years here or there make no difference. Speaking on that, how in the name of all that's right and just in the world can Alan Rickman not have a single Oscar nomination!? What the heck kind of world are we living in here?! Also, any readers from Charlottesville or its environs will please forgive me for making things up about their fine city, it's nothing bad though, I promise. And one last thing: I have come to realize that there are certain parallels between Harry playing Quidditch professionally in America and a certain Mr. Beckham coming over to play football. While I am a soccer fan in general and a Becks fan in particular, this is all just a big coincidence, I started this storyline well before he signed to play in L.A.

Saturday, February 14, 1998, continued

11:21 am GMT

Hogwarts Great Hall.

"I wonder what Voldemort is thinking right now." So said Arthur to Harry, who had been idly wondering the same thing every once in awhile over the previous week.

Albert Runcorn and Terrence Ibbotson had broken rather quickly under questioning, under drugs and.....well, other methods of information extraction. While Marcus Flint was not there to help Rufus, Travis, and Patrick Cleburne, as he had during the questioning of Royal Gibbon, they nevertheless had his roadmap of what questions to ask and from what angles. It helped that Cleburne had dragged out Gibbon's barely alive body from his cell to show them that there were many tangible benefits to cooperation. Cleburne's work on Gibbon had given new meaning to the term 'Unspeakable'. They had given some insight into Voldemort's operation, but they knew very little of his long-term plans, they had only been told of the Gringotts mission

less than two days before it actually happened. Still, every little bit helped.

Flashback one week to Azkaban Prison:

Peter Pettigrew hesitantly knocked on his Master's door, Voldemort was using the former Warden's office as his quarters, they were what passed for comfort in this place.

"Enter."

Pettigrew did so, and saw that Voldemort was examining a detailed map of Hogwarts and its grounds. He had a 'good news, bad news' type of discussion ahead of him, and he still had not decided which of them to lead with.

"What is it Wormtail, are our troops back already?" They were to be met by several Death Eaters, and transported back to Azkaban via portkey. Voldemort did not wear a watch or have a clock in the room, time itself meant relatively little to him.

"No Master, our troops were apparently not successful in their mission, at least not totally."

The bad man put his quill down, and finally looked up at his minion, who did not dare hold the gaze for too long.

"Explain."

"One of our people that was supposed to meet them at the gathering point, Cilius Evenert, brought a wireless set to listen to while he waited. It would seem that the WWN was broadcasting near the bank at the time of the operation, and they reported that our outside force was annihilated by the Aurors and the Dark Force Defense League people."

"How badly?"

“They were wiped out, but for a couple of prisoners. The Ministry people, led by Scrimgeour and Potter, then entered the bank, and came out 20 minutes later with a dozen prisoners. Scrimgeour announced the victory over the airwaves, saying that only a dozen League members were lost, and I am assuming no Aurors.” He held his breath, and waited for the explosion, but it did not come right away.

“And what of the goblin losses?” All he cared about really, at least at this point.

“Considerable.” Evenert had begged him not to be the one to tell Voldemort all of this, and Pettigrew had agreed, but only because he could share the next news. He took a deep breath and went forward.

“There were a couple of items of good news Master, news that I am positive will please you.”

“Go on.” Said in a very dangerous, ‘I had better bloody well like this’ tone of voice.

“Two of the League members who died were Amelia Bones and Albus Dumbledore.”

There was a moment of pause, which nearly caused Pettigrew to wet himself, as Voldemort contemplated this news.

“Are you sure that he’s dead?” He could not have cared less about Bones either way, knowing that she was no real brake on Rufus, or so he believed. All he cared about here was Dumbledore.

“ Scrimgeour announced it on the air, Potter and Biller were levitating his body out of the bank.”

“And our extraction team?”

“Evernet ordered them all back here Master, since there was no one to collect.” That was bad news really, since Death Eater recruiting had been suffering as of late. Now it might rebound.

“Tell him to take a small team and scout around Gringotts, find out the damage.” Evernet was probably another three spots away from being on Voldemort’s inner council, and was well respected within the Death Eater ranks.

“You don’t believe that Dumbledore is really dead, do you my Lord?”

“Something smells here Wormtail, and no, I don’t know if he is alive or dead. They lost a dozen, we lost our entire force, something about this just does not feel right. The Ministry and the goblins butcher our much larger force, but somehow we manage to take out the old man? Bones I can believe, but not him, he would not be that easy.”

Pettigrew sent off the recon team, who reported back that Gringotts would be open for business the next day, but with hugely ramped up security protocols. The buzz on the streets was that Dumbledore’s death was legitimate, and there was a lot of talk about it, wondering just how it had happened.

And then The Daily Prophet came out the next morning, and the story was told. Pettigrew brought his Master a copy, having thoroughly read the paper himself, and watched as Voldemort did a bit of speed-reading.

“He’s dead, Dumbledore is dead.” Voldemort’s voice was a bit hollow, and Pettigrew could tell that he was a bit sad, though eventually a small smile played around the corners of his scarred mouth.

“You believe it Master?”

“Taken down by one young pup and one middling soldier, all to save a boy that hated his guts. I will never understand that man.”

Pettigrew, who as a student had gotten along rather well with Dumbledore, was in total agreement on that score. He then voiced something that Voldemort was no doubt thinking himself.

“I wonder how Potter felt, I mean really felt, after seeing that happen.” He said it rather thoughtfully, and Voldemort even had a faint smile, motioning for him to be seated, and waiting for him to expound.

And therein, as Shakespeare liked to say, lies the rub. Peter Pettigrew was widely viewed within the Death Eater camp, and by his boss as well, as the Harry Potter expert among them, having been in such close proximity to the lad for almost three years, more proximity on a day to day basis than even Snape had had. Add to that his Marauder days around James, and Pettigrew was thought to have the best insight into what Harry might be thinking. And he did not disappoint here.

“I’m sure he’s relieved in a way, one less thing for him to worry about long-term, whether he defeats you or not. Of course he won’t Master, but Potter will plan as if he will.” Said somewhat hastily, but Voldemort took the point with nary a sneer.

“Of course. Go on.”

“He will feel guilt, as anyone one on their side would if someone died to save them. I’m sure your old friend Ginny Weasley still feels it after Percy died.”

“Interesting. And Runcorn and Ibbotson?” Voldemort had promoted young Ibbotson very swiftly through the Death Eater ranks, as the 23 year old had fought well in every battle that he had been a part of, and had a decent enough strategic mind as well.

“I would not want to be them right now, sitting in a Ministry holding cell defenseless in the faces of Biller and Cleburne.” They both smiled, Travis Biller and Patrick Cleburne could give lessons to the Death Eaters themselves on how to extract information.

“Not the situation of choice for them, no. So what do you suggest we do now, now that our grand plan has more or less worked.” Both of them felt that butchering a lot of goblins and killing Bones and Dumbledore was worth the manpower price that they had paid, but only barely.

“I have a muggle target in mind, one that I have been drawing up a rough plan for.” He pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket, and started to explain the concept to a now interested Voldemort.

Back to Hogwarts Great Hall:

Rufus gave a five minute ‘talk’ about Bones and Dumbledore, not a eulogy mind you, as those really weren’t the thing for magical funerals. Magical funerals had many ‘talks’ in them, given by any who wanted to stand up and say something. Due to security concerns, the service was limited to three hours, and the invitations had said as much, so anyone long winded was likely going to be looked at harshly.

Rufus was full of praise for both of them, talking about how Bones had helped him be a better administrator, and a better Minister, for her calm and cool counsel. He talked about Dumbledore and the Hogwarts of old, though Dumbledore had only been his Headmaster for two years, and his Transfiguration teacher for the first five. He did not touch on any disagreements he may or may not have had with either of them, and the words Harry Potter did not cross his lips. He yielded the floor next to Thaddeus Bones, Amelia’s brother and father to Susan.

Thaddeus shared a brief story about growing up with Amelia, who was a remote figure to most in the room, as the majority of the crowd was there to pay respects to Dumbledore. He gave over to McGonagall, and then on to each of the Hogwarts faculty. Even Sarah Westbrook, not a teacher at her alma mater under Dumbledore, shared a quick anecdote from her school days back in the mid-1980’s.

Various Head Boys and Girls from the past had their say, though Bill Weasley and Peter Tyson were conspicuous in their silence, and it was noted by one bold former Head Girl that one of Dumbledore’s

killers had been Head Boy less than five years earlier. Harry listened to all of this praise with a resigned attitude, and when Lisa Turpin, the current Head Girl finished, he made a point of standing up, to get his turn over with, knowing that it was much anticipated. He would be the only Weasley to speak this day other than Arthur, who had gone 15 minutes earlier.

“I am here today because of Albus Dumbledore. I mean here in the sense that I am alive and talking with you because he took two Killing Curses to the back to save me. Now why he did that is a topic for another time, but.....Dumbledore was the central figure in my life for as long as I can remember, even if I did not realize it at the time. He was a man capable of great advice, but he preferred to give hints, and allow you to figure things out on your own. As I'm sure many of you would agree, this was maddening at times, but ultimately we were the better for it. He was a mentor to many of us in here, a friend to most, a valued colleague to everyone else. Now the world knows the problems he and I had over the last couple of years. I insulted him more than once, he patronized me just as often, and our last encounter before last Saturday resulted in violence. But we never lost sight of the fact that we were on the same side. I honor his service to his country and to his society, and I honor his sacrifice that allowed me to live, there will never be another quite like him.” He sat down to murmurs of approval from most, an acknowledgement that he had not teed off on the old man like many suspected he might have wanted to. And yes, there were some murmurs of disapproval as well, from Dumbledore loyalists who resented the lack of blind praise.

Hagrid, who had given a halting spiel about loving Dumbledore as much as his own father, was not one of those disapprovers, as McGonagall and Flitwick had turned to look at him very sternly as Harry had sat down. They both felt that, given the circumstances, Harry had walked the fine line between respect and truthfulness with a circus performer's precision.

McGonagall had done a turnabout on Harry to some degree, begun by the Howler assault on Dean, which she was fully in favor of. The Leaky Cauldron fight was something she had disapproved of as well, while she had not wanted Dumbledore to get his jaw broken, she had lectured him for quite some time afterward about his tactics, telling

him that perhaps he might have shown his proven-to-be-bogus-later-anyway information to Bill or Arthur first, then on to Harry. That was a moment when she could have said that he had played himself into Harry's hands, but she actually agreed that The Boy Who Lived had been goaded too far for comfort. The final 'straw' had been Harry's comments to The Daily Prophet. She and our boy would not be having tea anytime soon, but there would be a definite thaw in their relations.

The service went on, and on, and on, until it was about to hit the 2:30 mark, and Remus stood up. He was the designated last speaker, this being his fief and all.

"I mourn them both, Amelia Bones and Albus Dumbledore. For far too many years, Amelia was the voice of reason in The Ministry. She was the only one who would stand up to Cornelius Fudge, who would prod Millicent Bagnold, who could galvanize Lafayette McLaws into action. She had a heavy burden on her, and she carried it off with honor, and with more effectiveness than we as a society have deserved at times." He paused for breath, and was gratified when he saw a smiling Thad Bones giving him a thumbs up.

"I first met Albus Dumbledore when I was just 11 years old, much as most of you did. I was different than most of you though, well, all of you. I was a werewolf. It would be inaccurate to say that Albus did not care that I was a werewolf, he cared very much. He cared about keeping me safe from a society that would have shunned me. He cared about making sure that I was not a danger to others, or to myself. He cared. I was 11 years old and above all else, I needed someone who cared about me. He fit that bill, and he never stopped looking out for what was best for me. He gave me a life in many ways, and nothing has saddened me more than to acknowledge that we have had strained relations in the last year or so, for reasons fairly obvious. Working in his shadow has been somewhat difficult these past five months, but his legacy is something we should all strive to live up to. I am very proud to have my name follow his on the roster of Hogwarts Headmasters, he was the greatest Wizard of our age, and I will forever miss him. Thank you very much for coming to our school to honor these two very important people."

He sat down, and Rufus very pointedly stood and started a round of applause. It was soon joined in by the entire crowd, some of them not understanding whether or not they were applauding Remus' speech specifically, or Dumbledore and Bones in general. Rufus addressed them one more time.

"Now we will have processional to view the bodies, and then we will depart so that the students can have their much delayed lunch. Thank you all for coming." He motioned for the front row, which included many members of the Wizengamot and the Hogwarts faculty, to begin the viewing. It took about 20 minutes for everyone in the Great Hall to get their quick looks, and soon enough most of them were on their way.

Remus had the House Heads spread word to the students that a soup and sandwich lunch would be served in the Common Rooms as soon as they got up there, the Valentine's Dance would start at 7 pm and things needed to get going for that. Harry and Sophie were chatting with Hermione and the others when Remus and McGonagall came up to them. Surprisingly, it was McGonagall who made the offer.

"Harry, Sophie, I know that you have your own dance to go to this evening back in America, but given the time difference, you are most certainly welcome to stay for ours as well, as our guests."

Remus was looking very pleased at the rapprochement going on here, as Sophie and Harry both exchanged dumbfounded expressions, they had expected to be hustled out of there at first opportunity, this was a bit odd. Sophie managed to find her voice first, as the DOM's all looked very pleased.

"That would be very nice ma'am, but we need to check with Professor Murray first. They're our ride back, so to speak."

And speak of the devil, Murray came into view right then. McGonagall told what she had offered, and Murray too didn't know what to say a first. Harry and Sophie didn't seem to be trying to get out of it, and she couldn't really see the harm.

“I don’t mind, if they want to stay. I will want to have The Ministry give them an escort back to Michigan, Rob or someone else will be fine.” She had things to do at school herself, otherwise she would have stayed. There was a volunteer though, who fit the bill: Salem Headmaster Beau Shupe, a long-time Auror back in the day.

“If the invitation would happen to include me, Professor McGonagall, I would be happy to stick around and see what a Hogwarts soiree would be like. They can floo back to your office from mine Joanne.” Shupe’s wife, like Neil Murray, was a doctor, and was currently on a shift at Mass General.

“You would be welcome of course Headmaster Shupe.” McGonagall, not anticipating that acceptance to her conciliatory gesture would have such red tape attached to it, nonetheless had no problem with that. Nor did Remus:

“Absolutely, it’ll give us a chance to compare notes a little more. I’ll see that The Ministry gets you some more portkeys.” He led Shupe away and back to his office, McGonagall following behind. Harry and Sophie said their farewells to the rest of the American contingent, and were led back up to Gryffindor, or they would have been if not for Fortrap, who had eased up to them unnoticed. There had been a six goblin delegation to the service, and Harry was just now realizing how high in the company his manager was.

“Harry, if we might have a word in private.”

Harry turned to Sophie.

“I’m sure you would just love to see a Hogwarts classroom, shall we?” The three of them walked over to one of the Transfiguration rooms, Fortrap not objecting to Sophie joining them. The DOM’s said that they would meet them up in the Common Room, and what the password was, Camus Bolla. Whatever that meant.

Once in the classroom, and after a standard Harry scan for anything suspicious, Fortrap got right to the point, handing over a key.

“Your old vault was too small for your new amount of money, so here is the key to your new one. Your account will still function as it always has been, and Dobby is well known among our counter and vault staff, so there is no problem there.”

“Glad to hear it.

“Very useful he has turned out to be, your best idea of the last few years, if you want one old goblin’s opinion. Now there is more to your inheritance than just money.”

Harry had been wondering about that, he had watched Dumbledore pack his things on the day he was sacked, and figured that some interesting stuff would come his way.

“The things I was wondering most about were Fawkes and his pensieve.”

“Both are currently residing with Alastor Moody, along with the other odds and ends, there is comparatively little you know, you yourself probably have more in the way of possessions than he did. Dumbledore did not have a house of his own you know, since Hogwarts provides accommodations for any teacher that requires it, and he had been here for well over 80 years until this past October. So his belongings had to fit in his office, his vault had nothing in it but money.”

“Am I going to have to fight my way into Moody’s place to get them?”

“Of course not, at least you would not be fighting by yourself. Since Gringotts is the executor of the will, we guarantee that you will receive what you inherit. That said, Mr. Moody is amenable to whatever plan that we come up with.”

“Well I don’t know about having a Phoenix in my dorm room, so perhaps Fawkes could live at Godric’s Hollow for the next few months.” He looked at Sophie, who thought that a wise idea, though

she was very excited to have a Phoenix in the 'family', since she had never seen one live and in color, pun intended.

"He's right, we only have four months and change to go, no need to disrupt things."

Fortrap had assumed as much, and had a plan ready.

"I shall have the entire sum of goods delivered to your shop, and you and your partners can decide where everything goes. I know they speak for you, and vice versa."

"That works for me, anytime Monday and after, I'll have them expecting it. After all, what's mine is theirs."

"Excellent, I'm glad we can finish this so expeditiously, it is always much easier when there is just one heir." He got up as if to leave, but Harry stopped him.

"May I ask a question or two before you leave?"

"Certainly." Knowing this would be good, he sat back down, and was not disappointed.

"How long have I been Dumbledore's heir?"

"Since November 1, 1981, the day after you were orphaned. I cannot say who was to inherit before he changed his will, but I can tell you that it was more than one person, all of whom you are at least acquainted with."

The first thing Harry and Sophie did after hearing this was mentally go through a list of names, starting with McGonagall and ending with Hagrid. Fortrap was not the least bit surprised by this, and while he had a thing or four to do this day, he indulged them a minute or so of it, before coughing lightly.

“Oh, sorry. You said something last week about Hogwarts getting gifts from him over the years, why didn’t they get the whole thing? I mean he knows that I don’t really need the money.”

“Dumbledore has established various scholarships over the years to ensure that no magical child eligible to attend Hogwarts would be unable to do so because of money. Even when your Weasley parents were at their poorest, they still would have been able to send all of their children to Hogwarts because of this, I believe they had five of them there for a period of two years. The scholarships are well funded, and you need not add to them. I believe that he had a lot of hope for you Harry, a great deal of belief in the kind of man that you would become. That is why he left it to you, instead of the previous heirs.” That was just his theory, as he had not been Dumbledore’s account manager, and the one who was for many years, had died a week earlier.

Harry badly wanted to spend a moment pondering this, but knew that the goblin wanted to leave. He had one more question.

“Are the goblins officially involved in the war now?”

“Yes, in our own fashion. We will not supply troops for any great battles that might take place, unless they come back to Gringotts of course, but we will supply intelligence and other auxiliary support when needed. Your man Tom Riddle made a serious miscalculation when he brought your war to our doorstep.”

He conveniently left out that the goblin manpower was low enough that they did not dare lend out any troops, however much they appreciated Rufus himself leading the Ministry forces that came to their aid. Their battle losses had been that bad, and this was not the only goblin war going on in the world at present, though none of the others were with humans. The goblins that had been seconded to WWW both had leg disabilities that precluded them from most fighting, and thus could be spared for prank manufacturing. Goblin magic was different than that of humans, but the spells and such used on WWW products was of such a low level, that it was not an issue.

“Thank you for your time Fortrap, I know how valuable it is.” Always be polite to a goblin, as Bill would say, especially one that personally manages your money.

“I’m always available to you Harry, you know that. And, speaking strictly as your banker, a choosing of the BQL would be a more financially sound choice than the American group. But then again, as you just said, it’s not like you need the money.” There was a hint of a smile, and Fortrap had always dealt with Harry as he would a very smart pupil. Harry would never find out that Bill had talked him up to Fortrap on every occasion that he could.

“Something tells me that you already know the decision that I’m going to announce.”

“That would be a lot of portkey trips my young friend, better to live and work on the same continent. I will let you know if Mr. Moody suddenly becomes intransigent about your new inheritance. Farewell.” He shook hands with them both, and strode out through the door. Harry’s new account balance was 33 million Galleons, not counting the 400,000 that he had on deposit in Flackter Alley. He and Sophie stared at each other for a moment, and then they burst out laughing.

“What the heck am I supposed to do with all that money?”

“Weren’t you thinking of some charities?”

“If I didn’t have total faith in Remus, I’d start another magical school over here.” Fortunately for Harry, there were no paintings in most of the classrooms, including this one, otherwise this information would have been speeding around the castle in record time. It was an intriguing thought though, and one that the two of them, and various Weasleys, would revisit over the next months.

They left the classroom, and Harry’s somewhat rusty sense of Hogwarts direction eventually got them up to the Gryffindor Common Room, where they each grabbed a sandwich, and continued their discussion group on the differences between Great Lakes and

Hogwarts. Draco, now considered more or less a friend, joined them for a little while before heading back to Ravenclaw to get ready for the dance. They spent an hour alone describing the Olympics, and Harry was prevailed to give a demonstration of the Reducto Challenge. He and most of the Gryffindors journeyed outside to the area around Hagrid's former cabin, which had never really been rebuilt, it was just used for storage. A piece of stone was found that roughly matched the size necessary, though there was no inner stone, and Harry started blasting away.

It was one of the few times in his Hogwarts life, as this more or less counted as, that he was willing to 'show off'. The crowd was suitably impressed, and while the stone was now past the point that Reparo would help it, more stones were found, and others took their shot. As expected, the DOM's were very skilled at this kind of thing, but so were some of the younger students as well. Dennis Creevey, while having not a lot of power for a Fourth Year, was extremely accurate, and could toss a small stone 10 meters and still hit it on the way down. The girls started leaving midway through, having hair and makeup and the like to do, but the boys stayed out for awhile. Dean had been unwilling to come out, but Seamus had, and as they walked back to the castle, Harry felt free to inquire as to how his lesson had really gone over.

"I'm not going to say that he deserved all that Harry, because I don't think he did. But he should have expected a reaction of some sort from you and her brothers, and he really hadn't been. He just figured that Ginny would get him fired and be done with it."

"A bit naïve don't you think?" That was understating it as far as Harry was concerned, but he felt no need to score points on Dean in front of Seamus.

"Look, he should have broken up with Ginny first, and I told him as much, you'll get no argument from me there."

"Seamus, none of us wanted to involve you in all of this, but with Dean turning on her, and by extension, us, we just could not take the risk that his best friend wouldn't do the same."

“I know, and did I complain?” No, in point of fact he hadn’t, at least according to Ron and Neville, and Harry wanted to find a way to reward that.

“You remember the DA parchment that Hermione made us sign?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Would you sign a specially made one, in order to get your job back? I can sell Fred and George on that, and Ginny too if need be. I should have thought of it months ago, and I’m sorry for any hassle that all this crap has caused you.” Harry genuinely liked Seamus, and Fifth Year issues with Mrs. Finnegan aside, had always preferred him to Dean. He knew that with the goblins, Truk and Reker, the shop’s manufacturing was mostly taken care of, but there was enough that Winky was still doing that Seamus could take on.

“We’re just talking for the rest of the time until graduation, right?” He sure sounded interested.

“Right, though I don’t know about summer and beyond, we’re still hashing that out.” A lot would depend on Ron and Warrick, and whether they signed to play Quidditch and started earning real money. Seamus was indeed interested, but there was one compelling factor that made him say no.

“I appreciate the offer and all, but Dean would not take it too well if I went back to work for you guys. Just because he was wrong with Ginny, doesn’t mean I would turn my back on him and snub him like that. My ma sends me enough pocket money to get by, and I have a job lined up for after graduation, so it wouldn’t really be worth the hassle.” Seamus would be going to work for his uncle back in Ireland, who dealt with various types of wand cores. Seamus would soon be traveling the world hunting for unicorn hairs, hearstrings, and other core items.

“Well if you change your mind, the offer will still be there.” He was glad that Seamus had turned it down, as he didn’t want any Ginny

issues for the time being, but the effect was the same as if he had taken it, and Harry was more than content to have his cake and eat it too.

“Thanks Harry, again, I appreciate it.”

They got back to the castle, and the boys all made sure that their robes were clean, no rock bits and things on them. Sophie was with Ginny and Hermione in the trunk, Hermione spent so much time in Ginny’s room that she basically only went into hers to sleep, things were a little tense with Lavender and Parvati because of the Dean issue. They returned, with Sophie having told the rest of the gang where she and Harry would be for the next little while.

The Great Hall was more pink than Harry had ever seen it since the days of Gilderoy Lockhart and his cupid dwarves. That was a story that had somehow slipped past Harry in all that he had told Sophie, so he and Ron had a delightful time reliving it for her on the way to the dance floor for their first round.

“His eyes as green as pickled toad!” Ron had mostly forgotten about that too, and was now torturing Ginny with the recollection of it as her face got more and more red with every step that they took. They were getting along better than they had in years, so she didn’t pop him one for it. At least not physically or magically.

“I was 11 years old Ron! Besides, it was more than you tried with a girl when you were that age.” Wham! Luna let out a giggle, and Neville was trying to hide his smile as well. Hermione just shook her head while her man responded, not the least bit ashamed.

“I was too busy worrying about Philosopher Stones to think much about girls then.” Harry nodded vigorously in agreement, reminding Sophie a bit of Dobby, perhaps they were rubbing off on each other.

“Always an excuse.”

“Saving the magical world is rough work you know, not much time for fun and games. Right Harry?”

“What he said.”

Music was provided by a modified record player that Remus had taken with him from stop to stop on his no longer vagabond life. He and Tonks got the dance started with a twirl around the floor, and Tonks was young enough, and hot enough, that quite a few boys in the Great Hall were very jealous of their Headmaster at the moment. Dumbledore had always danced with every female teacher, and Remus did the same over the course of the night, including the recently married and now pregnant Alexandra McDowell, Lily's successor in Ancient Runes. The DOM's and Sophie got to meet Sarah Westbrook's husband, coincidentally also named Harry, he was a muggleborn Wizard who played football for Coventry City.

Sophie was much in demand for dancing, and even allowed Draco to take her for a spin. They talked very little, neither liking the idea of bringing up any Harry issues with the other, and our boy himself, dancing with Padma Patil at the time, was still keeping a wary eye on his former enemy. The elder werewolf, and Headmaster, also wanted a dance with Sophie, only this time more for the talking than the gentle taunting.

“How is he doing?” Harry was currently dancing with Hermione, and thinking nothing of this pairing.

“You mean about Dumbledore I'm guessing.”

“Right in one. Ordinarily I would say that Dumbledore passing on would be a relief to Harry, and I wouldn't blame him a bit. But the way Albus died is what is the factor here.”

Sophie did not like the direction that this conversation was heading one bit, and tried to head Remus off at the pass.

“I'm not going to psychoanalyze Harry for you Remus, if you want to know what he's thinking about that, you should ask him yourself. And do it soon, before he gets even more tired of the subject.”

“He must be getting it from all sides.”

“Not from all sides, we don’t talk about it with him much, but then again, we only met Dumbledore that one time. We only really knew him from Harry’s memories and his stories.”

“Is he happy?” That was what Remus really wanted to know from this conversation.

“Yes he is, he tells me that he laughs and smiles more than ever.”

“I’m glad.”

“Something tells me that you could say the same.”

“Well I do have my dream job, that has a lot to do with it.”

And it did, the age and lines had almost leached off of Remus in the last couple of years, and when the full moon wasn’t nigh, he definitely looked his 38 years and no more.

The dance went off without incident, having most of the nasty Slytherins gone ensured that. Beau Shupe was constantly surrounded by people, wanting to know all about Salem. Most of the Hogwarts folk had never even heard of Great Lakes before Harry had started going there, but they had all heard of The Salem Witches Institute, where Shupe was only the third male Head in it’s 430 year history. He also made a point of spending some time with Neville before the dance ended, and had an interesting proposition for him.

“One of my Herbology teachers is going to retire after the next school year, and I want their successor in place as soon as possible. I’ve been owling the various English speaking schools about their top students, and none of the Herbology teachers I correspond with rave about a student the way that Professor Sprout does you.”

“You want me to come over and teach there?” Neville knew that Sprout was probably at least five years away from retiring, he knew because she had told him as much, and he had just figured to live off

of his inheritance and do research while biding his time. Sprout had not mentioned any interest from other schools to him either, later on he would be curious as to how Shupe would have done the approach without this apparent coincidence of him needing to be here to escort Harry and Sophie back home..

“Come over during the Easter holiday and talk to us about it, my Herbology Department and myself. I won’t schedule anyone else to be interviewed until after you’ve been there, if then.” He quite enjoyed the dawn of realization on Neville’s face that this was not, in fact, a joke of any kind.

“Wow, of course I’m interested.”

“I’m glad to hear it, and before you ask, Harry had nothing to do with it, he doesn’t know I’m looking for someone, though he has mentioned you more than once in conversations we’ve had at various meetings. But to be honest, I’ve seen how the British touch has worked at Great Lakes, and it would be interesting to have one of my own on staff. If you get the job, as I’m sure you will, you would teach the Novices next year and do some research and greenhouse experiments. It would be a full time job, at the same salary that we give all the other men and women who are new to teaching.” Which was a lot more than Hogwarts beginning teachers usually made. There was not one Salem teacher, young or old, that made less than Remus did as Hogwarts Headmaster.

“Just tell me when to show up.” Neville was busy thinking that this would work out perfectly. He could live in Charlottesville and commute via the floo network.

“I’ll have a roundtrip portkey set sent over to you, I’ll do it via the joke shop guys, just to make sure it gets there.” He would let that bit of information slip in front of his Deputy, who still had unpleasant memories of the twins from the mock attack. Beau needed some amusement.

“I do some part-time work for them, so we constantly have Harry’s staff going back and forth.”

“Even better. I’ll see you in a few weeks.” They shook hands, and Shupe moved off to talk to Remus some more, while a very excited Neville went off to find Luna, who was dancing with Harry as it turned out. He told them what Shupe had said, and Harry’s gleefully surprised expression confirmed to his friend that he had known nothing about it.

“Oh man, this is perfect Neville.”

“Luna, what do you think?”

“I think that we had better practice for your interview, you will want to make a good impression.”

“You’re in favor of me doing it?” It would be a deal breaker if she wasn’t.

“Of course, it’s a great opportunity for you, and we can see each other all the time because of the trunks.”

Neville’s sense of relief was totally palpable, and it made Harry and Luna both smile. Harry checked his watch, and it was going on 9:30 pm, Hogwarts time. Given that they would have to make portkey stops, he and Sophie would probably have to leave within the half hour. He sought out McGonagall, though not to dance, as she had done her one dance with Remus and wouldn’t do another one.

“Thanks for this, we’ve had a great time.”

“I’m glad. You are always welcome here Harry, and not just for Quidditch games and Dark Force Defense League meetings.”

“Well I was planning to stop by to watch Hermione, Neville, and Ron graduate.”

“A proud day for us all, three very unique students.” She was smiling when she said that, and Harry could not agree more.

“I understand that graduation day has been moved to a Sunday this year.” It had always been on Saturdays before this, so that students could take the Hogwarts Express on Sunday morning. Now the train would be leaving Sunday night, and students would go directly from the ceremony to the train.

“Yes it has, The Headmaster and The Minister felt that it would be better for security.”

“ Well, if you’re not doing anything the day before, you and Professors Flitwick, Sinistra, and Sprout are more than welcome to come to our affair at Great Lakes. Remus can’t come because of the wards, but I would be honored if my other teachers from here would attend. You all gave me a lot of knowledge, however little I may have appreciated it at the time I’m sorry to say.”

McGonagall almost did not know what to say for a moment, which Harry perversely enjoyed. He had come up with the invitation on the spur of the moment, wanting to give a gesture to her after her invitation to the dance here. While part of him still relished confrontation with Dumbledore’s right hand woman, most of him wanted no ill feelings and to have a sense of closure there. Once Ginny and Luna graduated, he felt it unlikely that he would ever enter the castle again. Not totally unlikely, but somewhat.

“For my own part, I will be there gladly Harry, thank you. I will talk with Professor Flitwick, Professor Sinistra, and Professor Sprout as well, I’m sure that they would love to be there as well.” She didn’t bring up Hagrid or Trelawney, and Binns was unable to leave the castle in any case.

“Thank you Professor, I’ll see you next month.”

“Have a safe trip back.”

No, they didn’t hug or anything, but both of them felt a lot better about their ‘relationship’.

Harry collected Sophie and Shupe, after reminding Beau that he had a dance to oversee as well. He was hip deep in a friendly soccer v. football debate with Harry Westbrook, and it did not look to end anytime soon without outside interference. He was persuaded though, and they took their soon to be uneventful portkey ride back to Salem in short order. After a quick floo ride to Murray's office, they immediately retired to Harry's trunk for a short nap.

The Great Lakes Valentine's Day festivities were pretty tame for the most part. The gang, as well as the rest of the Senior class, reveled in their last Great Lakes dance though, one of the last stops on their nostalgia tour. It was different than your typical high school, or even boarding school, because these students had been there for seven years, longer than their muggle counterparts in The United States. The Seniors, and not just the gang, were the first to arrive and the last to leave. Harry especially enjoyed himself, he was still under the impression that this was the last dance he would ever have to go to, not counting weddings.

Marty and Keisha showed up to the dance, Marty with Anna Kessler and Keisha with Mike McDermott, one of Marty's roommates. They were the only Novices to attend, and not that many Freshmen, the next year up, came to the dance either. Marty got some gentle teasing about Anna being his girlfriend, and while that was not the case, yet, he still got a little defensive about it.

"So what's wrong with that? You'd better not talk bad about her." That could be taken a few different ways, and Marty and Anna were now seen as Reiko and Warrick, the younger years, with a dash of Harry and Hermione thrown in there as well. All the girls were impressed that Marty did not seem the least bit ashamed about having a date, while the guys liked his guts anyway. He would be a great future Marauder, they all thought. Keisha and Mike were strictly friends, young Mike had already been warned that he was not getting a kiss goodnight no matter how good a time Keisha had, but he was cool with it.

Everyone danced well into the night, the gang knowing that Sunday, as per usual these days, would be entirely set aside for NEWT review. Harry in particular had his nose to the proverbial grindstone, having

three years of American Muggle Studies to make up, as well as a lot of History of Magic. Defense he couldn't have been less worried about, with Charms only a slight worry, and Transfiguration he figured that he would get an E with no muss or fuss. An O there was probably out of the question, though non-Advanced students in the wand courses did occasionally get O's on the NEWT's, even if there weren't that many usually.

Saturday, February 21, 1998

10:00 am

Flackter Alley Gateway

The gang, after the obligatory warnings from Murray and withdrawals from the bank, exited Flackter Alley and made immediately for the large mall. This time they took a slightly different route, in case Voldemort was going to try any watchers this time.

He was not actually, he had given up this loser of a plan after Pettigrew somewhat obliquely convinced him that the results were not worth their people continuously being caught doing it, Pettigrew was convinced that one day Harry was going to send them a severed head or something like it. They had still not cottoned on to the fact that Dobby and Winky were discreetly following the gang everywhere they went. Voldemort was just going to wait until Harry graduated, at least as far as confronting him directly. They did have other things brewing, as would soon be seen.

Their first stop, on this, their penultimate Flackter trip, was the video store. More and more movies were coming out on the new DVD format, and Harry made a wide selection, more to build an impressive looking collection than anything. This was all just waiting, as they killed some time before lunch. After lunch, everyone split up and Harry and Sophie went to a certain store with shiny objects.

Yes, it was that time. They knew that this was an important day for them, but they did not want to let the day keep building up into something way too pressurized, so they chose to do it now rather than wait until the end of the day. Plus, the last thing that they wanted

was any of their friends kibitzing. So they simply avoided telling the others where they were going.

But they all knew. This was the last Flackter trip before Sophie's birthday, and they figured that Harry would not want to risk a trip into London. The facts fit no other theory, and so they all agreed independently not to spy on the lovebirds, going to a movie instead, more to avoid temptation than any real desire to see a second run showing of Good Will Hunting.

Harry and Sophie entered Vincent's, the 'upscale' jewelry store in the mall here, and found that there were not many customers in the place. They initially waved off the saleswoman's assistance, and instead just looked around for awhile, before finally targeting the engagement ring section. They asked the saleswoman to come back over, and got a nice little primer on what type of ring they should be looking for. The woman, who was the daughter of the jewelry store's owner, had Sophie spend some time trying rings on of various weights. As Sophie had never regularly worn a ring before, this took some getting used to. Sophie had been 'supporting' herself, with scholarship assistance, since not long after birthday number 12, and she had always found other things to spend money on besides jewelry. Even the slight subtraction of the stationary expenses, which Harry picked up for all of the gang, had made a big difference in her budgeting. Speaking of which:

At the outset, Harry had let it slip that money was not a concern here, and despite his store bought winter parka and handmade Weasley sweater, she seemed to take him at his word, and showed the two of them some of the higher line items. She just figured that he was some trust fund college kid, which was not that far from the truth, who was trying to look cool by dressing down, which was somewhat the truth. Somewhat, because for all his magical power and wealth, his political connections and Quidditch talent: Harry would never think of himself as cool, all those years in muggle primary school as an outcast and Dudley's punching bag had forever excised that potential.

After what seemed like forever to Harry, but was really only 20 minutes, they settled on a nice one that complemented Sophie's relatively small hands. It was not so big that it would weigh her down

or look out of place. The diamond was very well cut and practically flawless, and the setting was pretty impressive. The price that was quoted was over \$15,000, and given that Sophie was there, Harry did not bother to try and negotiate, not wanting to give this slightest hint of an appearance of wanting to stint on her. He assumed that the markup on things like this was pretty high, but rationalized that these people needed to make a living.

Of course Sophie could not have cared less about how expensive it was, not really anyway. She had known from day one that Harry was rich, and very generous with his things and about buying presents, and it was sometimes kind of hard work to talk him out of buying her anything and everything. Hard work because Harry just flat out liked buying things for people and making them smile. Some of the younger girls in Cortez and other Houses, who hadn't known Sophie for a long time, just assumed that she reveled in having the most famous young Wizard in the world as her beau, and was showered with presents and things all the time. The ones who knew her best knew the truth though, and she did get a lot less flack than someone in a similar situation at Hogwarts would have gotten, if Harry had stayed there.

Hell, she got less flack than Hermione had during Fourth Year, and she and Harry had never even hinted at becoming a couple. Harry himself was not unmindful of that, and aside from flowers pretty often, had pretty much acceded to her wishes about presents, only giving them on her birthday, the ring wouldn't count there, and Christmas.

He watched Sophie hold her slim hand up in the air and the ring just sparkled. He gave a benign smile to the saleswoman, and said.

"I believe we've found it."

Everyone was smiling now, whether it be for true love or love of a commission well earned. The ring didn't even need to be resized, so they could take it out of the store with them. Harry's Brit credit card did not have this kind of limit yet, and there was no way he was going to try and pay that kind of a bill with cash, the poor woman would think he was a drug dealer. Instead he wrote a personal check, to be

drawn from the goblins' muggle bank front. He saw the look on her face, and explained, quite sympathizing.

"I know it doesn't look like I have that kind of money, but call the bank and they'll confirm it. They're waiting for your call." He had set this up during his trip to the bank earlier. The saleswoman called his bluff with an apologetic smile, and was quickly assured that young Mr. Potter had that amount of money available. The entire visit had taken less than half an hour, and Harry pocketed the box as they left.

"Six weeks we have to wait, that seems like a long time."

"Hey, you're the one who likes the 'moments'" Don't kid yourself folks, Sophie had grown to love them too.

"Yes I do, and don't think that this is your birthday present either. I have something else planned for that."

"Don't tell me." Said in a voice that suggested that she wouldn't mind at least a hint, but alas.

"I won't, you will have to tear apart The Hollow to find it." He had bought it a few weeks earlier after seeing a periodical photo, with a little help from a friend in Britain.

"Ooh, a challenge. But no thanks. So when are we having the big day after the next big day." Heh heh.

"I'm assuming that you're talking about the wedding itself.....umm. Well.....good question. I was thinking either one of the next two Christmases, or the Summer of next year." That was quite the range of choices.

"Are you still wanting to do it as the clock hits 2000?"

"It's a nice idea, but I don't have my heart set on it. Let's talk it over with Warrick and Reiko and see what they have planned."

“No double wedding?” She did not really want one, but figured that Harry would like the idea after seeing the twins’ affair. Not so fast there Sophie.

“I’d rather not if you don’t mind, I want them to have their day without any attention going to us.” He was very sensitive to something like that, though Warrick had no problem being the sidekick in their situation. It sure helped that he was 16 when it started, rather than 11, as Ron had been.

“Sounds good. Do we give them the first date, since they’ve been together longer, or do we get first dibs, since we bought the ring first. We did buy the ring first, right?” She wasn’t being competitive there, she just wanted some inside information.

“As far as I know we did, yes. He hasn’t shared anything different with me.”

“I know how that sounds, you know, it’s not that I want to be first, or have to be first.”

“I would bet that they’ll be doing the same thing we are now, only in the April Flackter trip, the last one.”

“No bet, you’re probably right.”

They had some time to kill before the others got out of their movie, so Sophie forced Harry to buy some new jeans and shirts. Summer wear could wait until the April Flackter visit, as everyone was planning to spend a lot more time at Isla de Marauder. They spent quite the while debating on how to tell Mother and Father Weir about the nuptials, whether it should be in person or via letter. And in person would be a bit tricky, since there was just the one more Flackter trip, and the Easter vacation had been truncated due to the extra Olympics this year. No one bothered to point out that they were not officially engaged until after Harry had actually asked Sophie and she said yes.....but they figured that the trip to the jewelry store itself was an implied engagement in and of itself.

They met the others outside the movie theater, and then everyone walked back for some dessert at Mario's. Harry and the restaurant's owner had corresponded a few times, and it had been agreed that Harry would get first dibs on the place once the man passed away. He had placed a refundable deposit in escrow, a price having already been agreed upon, and all that was left was the death itself. Not that Harry was in any hurry to hasten it of course, the other man seemed like a nice enough guy. Sophie had loved the gesture, as he hoped she would, and the homemade tiramisu was as good as ever.

Friday, February 27, 1998

8:40 am

Great Lakes Dining Hall

Murray stood up and everyone fell silent, anticipating some big announcement. It wouldn't be too huge, but it would be an attention getter.

"I received word this morning that Salem launched an unsuccessful assault against Pathfinder in the wee hours of this morning." She stopped there, and let everyone bask in the embarrassment of the purported Number One school in magical America getting defeated in both it's missions. There were a lot of satisfied expressions on the faces of the students, and even more on the teachers. Murray herself, a Great Lakes graduate, had a slightly smug smile on her face as she resumed her speech.

"I know, a satisfying moment for all of us, even if we can admit it only within the Great Lakes family here. Pathfinder is now two for two in their portion of the exercise, which is now completed, though of course there is no championship round, at least not this year. So the clock starts today on us. We have at minimum six weeks to prepare for an attack by Tecumseh, and at most three months, since we have agreed that all of this should be done before the four school Olympics are to be held. We have the advantage in going last, and we are going to exploit that advantage as best we can, right?" Everyone was smiling and nodding now.

“Good, any questions or suggestions, see Professors Ripley or Greenleaf, or one of the Senior Year Basic Combat students. Thank you.” She sat down, and Harry then stood up.

“On behalf of the Senior Year Basic Combat students, we would like to remind you that the roof is off limits until after Tecumseh hits us, though we will find you a way around the wards for any useful purpose you might have up there.” The Astronomy classes did not meet on the roof, but in the high reaches of the Athletic Field, though Harry was talking about people with amorous intent. Harry continued.

“In three weeks time we will be conducting a drill, whereby certain elements of the Junior Class will be doing a mock attack of their own against us. You will not be told the night it will happen, you will need to respond instantly to the alarms when they go off.....and trust me folks, you will know the alarms when you hear them. Professors Greenleaf and Ripley will have more details in the coming weeks, and we in Basic Combat are always available for questions when you need us. Thanks.” He now sat down, and there was a lot of murmuring as he did.

The next day, Harry and Sophie took an off the books trip to Charlottesville, to do some real estate trolling. This was not a totally unique thing, as Senior Year students were often allowed to take trips such as this, to secure their housing for the Fall, if they weren't going to live in the dorms. Their search was somewhat narrower than most, since they were to have so many people living there: Harry, Hermione, Ron, Lee, and the seven Americans, with Neville still chewing over the logistics of it, not to mention Ginny and Luna a year later. And that did not even count Dobby and Winky, however little space they took up. That's a lot of people for one house, and Harry quickly found that a house the size of The Hollow, which barely fit them all, would run him into the millions. He had millions of course, thanks to Sirius and Dumbledore, but the last thing he wanted to do was attract attention that way.

So he did the next best thing: He bought a pair of three bedroom houses that were next door to each other on Madison Avenue, or at

least he made arrangements to do so. It was a lot cheaper that way, and the houses were less than a quarter of a mile from the campus, his new friend Diego Almodovar had been a big help in that regard, doing some recon work for him ahead of time. The following week Harry would contract Abel Rosnovski, the American magical construction magnate, to build an underground tunnel between the two homes, for times when the clan just did not feel like Apparating. They would also hook the houses up to the American floo network, so that Harry could get to Quidditch practices and such. He and Sophie were there and back in less than eight hours, and they had gone to town a little bit at the campus bookstore, so all of the gang and the Little Three were wearing UVA shirts and hats for quite the while after. The houses were still occupied of course, so the gang could not act on Jonas' idea of having a trunk put there so that they could look around, but they would be able to move in come summer.

Monday March 9, 1998

Grunnings Manufacturing Inc., Little Whinging, Surrey

6:55 am GMT

Peter Pettigrew slipped into the building under a Disillusionment Charm, after first relishing the first breaths of non-Azkaban Island air he had had in many a month. He walked very carefully so as to avoid the few graveyard shift employees who were anticipating the end of their shifts, Grunnings not running a full third shift this time of year. He had to be very, very careful here, as he suspected that the remnants of the Order, outlawed or not, kept some kind of long-term surveillance up on Harry's family members. There were no anti-magical alarms on the front door, for reasons that he found foolish and sloppy, and so he just figured that anything magical there would be attached to Vernon's office, where he had no intention going in any case. Another Death Eater animagus had done some listening at Privet Drive and learned that Vernon had no outside meetings planned for the day. The Death Eater in question was certainly glad that Vernon insisted that his wife know every single thing he would be doing each day, it made planning for him a lot easier than it should have been.

Grunnings, like any company that makes things, had an area set aside for the chemicals used in the making of their drills. This area was not locked off in any way, but was laden with various signs that let the employees know that this was an area where they should not horse around or the like, and where they should especially not smoke, or even carry the implements to smoke. This was the place that Wormtail wanted to go

He arrived, after some rudimentary searching, only to find a pair of employees doing an inventory of some kind. From the sounds of their conversations, it did not appear as though they would be finished any time soon, so Pettigrew made a split minute decision. After checking to make sure that no one else was in the eye line, he took out his wand.

“Stupefy. Stupefy.” Stunning Spells, not Killing Curses.

Contrary to popular belief, most Death Eaters did not get a huge charge out of killing muggles for sport, and Pettigrew in fact had not used Avada Kedavra since his initiation into Voldemort's ranks almost two decades previous, aside from a brief few at the Lucius Malfoy trial battle. Pettigrew thought of himself as a planner and an organizer, rather than some thug who would kill upon command. He was about to kill a few dozen with this plan, but he told himself that it was all for a greater purpose, as part of the larger plan. That he was a key architect in the larger plan both fed his ego, and eased the tiny amount of conscience that he had left.

He transfigured the two men into pieces of paper, and inserted them into the clipboards that the men had been using. He heard the sound of more voices, as the first shift was entering the plant. Vernon was not due for another hour or so, which suited Pettigrew just fine. He took out of his pocket a bag of WWW's very own spell grenades, which had by now evolved into, basically, enhanced versions of the muggle variety, if the right spell was attached to it. And today it would be.

All seven of the racquet balls were to be loaded with Incendio, making them a series of fire grenades, rather than the Percussion Hex kind that the WWW three used in the Battle of Gringotts. Plus it

would have the added advantage of destroying the evidence of what caused the explosions, though the magic would probably not be burned up, that was still a topic debated among magical theorists. But the plan was not designed for deniability anyway. He quickly loaded the balls up, put a 90 minute timer on them, placing the grenades strategically around the containers of chemicals, particularly noting the ones that said 'Flammable' on them. He then Disillusioned the grenades and himself, and got the heck out of Dodge, though that too took a bit of time, as he had to wait for the door he was using to open up again. He got out without a problem though, and as soon as he was clear, he Apparated back to the rendezvous point, and was soon on to Azkaban.

He immediately got himself to his Master's quarters, and was relieved to find that Voldmeort was awake and kicking. Pettigrew, in the three years or so that he had been back with his Master, had never once seen him eat or drink anything. He assumed that it happened, since food was delivered to the bad man's various quarters, but it had never been witnessed by anyone that Pettigrew knew of. Voldemort just looked up at him from his desk.

"Well? Did you accomplish your mission?"

"I did my Lord, the only way that it fails is if those containers do not hold the chemicals they claim to." Given the way things had gone, operationally, over the last year or so, Pettigrew felt that he had to include that slight disclaimer.

"Good. You have your people in position?"

"I do Master. Greenwall is standing by the Dursley home, and Powell is close enough to Grunnings to see and hear the explosion, without getting caught in it himself. He will deliver the message to the shop afterward." Wormtail himself had been ordered to do the job and get back, no witnessing for him this time.

"Alert me when they return. Dismissed." It was not said harshly, but rather with a sense of 'this had better work', since this was Pettigrew's plan in its entirety.

Pettigrew himself couldn't see how it could fail, and it was a cheap plan at that, a long since paid cost of 50 galleons for the package spell grenades that they were drawing from. Which they were running out of, so someone was going to have to go undercover to WWW and get some more. He had fond memories of Fred and George from watching them grow up, however much trouble they were to his side of the war now, and did not mind a bit funneling them some Galleons. Voldemort had either not noticed that they were paying Potter for the means to murder his not so beloved uncle, or just did not care.

Six hours later, at Great Lakes:

Joanne Murray strode through the Cortez Lounge, greatly hoping that her young charge would be where he was supposed to be. Sleeping in his trunk, a nicely furnished one she had noted, was not against the rules, but without being told, she figured that she could not get into it. Nor was she tempted to really, if there had been anything truly illegal or dangerous in there, Harry would have put up a fight about her going in there, and he had not said a word. Good thing that Sophie had been able to warn Dobby though, as the twins had been planning a visit for that time. But Murray was, and forever would be, blissfully unaware of it.

As it happened though, Harry had just come out of the trunk when his Headmistress knocked on his door, she could have walked right in, but not really wanting a show of any kind. He answered the door while still in his pajamas, figuring it was one of the others. Not so. He invited her in, as there was no one else there, Warrick being in the other trunk, and Rick and Terry both with their girlfriends. Murray ordinarily would have raised an eyebrow or two at that kind of shacking up, but for this moment was somewhat relieved.

“Good morning Harry, I am afraid I have some news for you. I don't know whether you will consider it to be good or bad, but you need to be told either way.”

“This sounds ominously interesting. What happened?”

“At approximately 8:30 am this morning, an explosion destroyed your uncle’s factory. The place was obliterated, and he was inside.”

“Was the explosion magical or muggle?” A logical first question, and she was ready for it.

“The thinking right now is that it was muggle. I just talked to Travis a few minutes ago, and they have one of their people undercover with the police there, to keep an eye on the investigation and to look for clues. Right now though, it appears as though there was a fire in their chemical storage area.”

“What was the cause of the fire though?”

“They’re still investigating, they only put the fire out a couple of hours ago.”

“Why are they sure that he’s there?”

“Because Dumbledore and Moody had sensors in his office, and he tripped them at the normal time. There was no magic in the office, that would have raised an alarm, but he was there at the time.”

“And Moody is still monitoring these wards?” If Dumbledore hadn’t already been dead, Harry would have been willing to kill him for putting up wards in Vernon’s office but not his home.

“So it would seem.”

“How is Petunia doing?”

There was no immediate answer forthcoming, and Harry leaned forward on his bed, this was not going to be good. And it sure wasn’t.

“She’s in hysterics Harry, and yes, she is blaming you. The Aurors have had Listening Charms up in their house ever since you left, and certain keywords trip them, and your name is one of them. She thinks that you murdered your uncle. Sanford Jenkins is handling this, and

he's put your aunt under sedation before she can say this to anyone else." Harry knew that Jenkins was fully capable.

"Anyone else? Who has she spouted this crap to so far?" He knew that he had an airtight alibi, but he didn't want to have be on the lookout if he ever set foot in muggle Britain again.

"No one that has not been Obliviated since, and Travis took some risks to tell me this over the telephone. He said that someone from his office will be here this morning to discuss some options."

"What about Dudley?"

"I would imagine that they're waiting to see what he says, he was still en route from his school when Travis phoned me."

Harry leaned forward on his bed and put his hands through his hair.

"What do you think really happened?" She had told him everything that she knew, but Harry respected her mind and wanted to hear her theory.

"Things like this happen all over the world, and have nothing to do with our kind. There any number of possible explanations, and you being his nephew is only one of them."

"So you're suggesting that I not read anything into it."

"Well for the time being anyway. Let the police and our friends do their investigation, and see what they come up with. I agree that it is a cause for concern that of all the factories to blow up in England this day, it happened to be your uncle's, but let's wait and see."

"Yes ma'am."

"Good, I'll come get you when your visitor gets here."

"Thank you Professor Murray."

She left, and a feeling better about the whole thing Harry went about his morning routine. Well he felt better about it until he told the gang. To a one they all assumed that it was done by the Death Eaters, and they were proven right when Rob Graham and Edgar Stiles came to see him during his lunch hour. They went up to Murray's office for what turned out to be a brief conference.

"Once they got the fire out, we sent Nelson DeMille in there to check for magic, he's our best person for detecting magical residue. We found that Incendio had been used, as well as some Disillusionment Charms. There was too much damage to find out exactly who, even if we had most Death Eaters' magical signatures on file, which we don't anymore, we have killed off too many of the old-time ones in the last few battles. There was also this, it was delivered to WWW, and Lee Jordan got it to us. He didn't know what it was at first, otherwise he might have had Dobby get it to you directly, but we have an arrangement with him to report anything suspicious." Rob took a piece of paper out of his pocket and slid it over to Harry. It was short and to the point.

Because we can.

Harry immediately recognized the handwriting as that of Peter Pettigrew, though the note was of course unsigned. He passed the slip of paper back to Rob.

"That's Peter Pettigrew's writing, in case you were wondering."

"We assumed as much, since he seems to be Voldemort's Chief of Staff. Any reply to him?"

"Not anything I would care to say in front of a lady. What's going on with Petunia and Dudley?"

"Your aunt is still under sedation, and your cousin is not taking the news too well either, he's not mentioning your name though.. Your Headmistress here says that she told you about Petunia's accusations, so we need to decide what to do here."

“Are we talking Obliviation?”

“I think it’s come to that, yes. We are simply stretched too thin to have someone constantly going over there to Obliviate people that she blabs to, and it’s not out of the realm that Dudley might start talking to his schoolmates. He hasn’t before now mind you, we have the same keyword Listening Charms on his school that we have on the house, but it’s only a matter of time.” Indeed Dudley had never once mentioned to any of his Smeltings mates that he even had a cousin who had lived with him, and none of his gang from primary school had gone with him there.

“Is this something I need to sign off on, or are you just doing me a courtesy by telling me?”

“The latter, but if you have any alternative ideas, The Minister of course would listen with interest.” Both Rob and Edgar were relieved that Harry was not putting up any arguments at all.

“How much would they know about me? After the Obliviation?”

“We will tell them that you died in a car accident over here recently, though we will remove that you and your mother are magical. There are too many people in the neighborhood who know about you existing in the first place, so we can’t have you dying with your parents. The Minister has already tasked Steven Redgrave to work on the script, he should be doing it tomorrow morning, our time.” Harry had met Redgrave a couple of times during July, and knew of his reputation, that would be a lot of memories to erase.

“I won’t put up a fuss, you can assure The Minister of that. Tell him that I’ll do whatever is necessary to get this done.”

“Thanks for that Harry, you know that you cannot go to the funeral, even on the sly, right? It would render our Obliviation moot if they saw you.”

“I wouldn’t anyway. That man made my life a living hell for 10 straight years, and then four straight summers. I would be the worst hypocrite in the world if I chose to honor him. No, I’ll be safely here when they bury him, I can promise you that.”

“Good enough. Now Edgar and I had better get going. We’ll both be coming here to pick you up for the League meeting on the 21st. With your permission Joanne, we can come get Harry on Friday night and avoid most of the portkey lag. He can stay at his house and just come over to the meeting with Fred and George.” This League meeting would be at Hogwarts of course, and be between the Quidditch doubleheader of Ravenclaw v. Slytherin and Hufflepuff v. Gryffindor, in that order.

“That’s fine by me Rob, you’re done at 4:00 pm on Fridays, right Harry?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good, you two can come stay for dinner and then be off.”

“Sounds like a plan ma’am, thank you. See you all next week.” They rose and shook hands, and were soon off in the floo to Boston.

The Vernon Dursley funeral service four days later went off without a hitch, and Petunia and Dudley had been Obliviated to the point that when they were asked where Harry might be, they repeated the story Rufus had concocted word for word. They even accepted condolences on Harry’s death with grace and civility, none of the neighbors had really believed that Harry was in St. Brutus’, he just looked too harmless to be an Incurably Criminal Boy. Tonks was there in disguise, and would later tell Harry that in the beyond unlikely event that he ever had a yen to visit Little Whinging.....well he had just better not have that yen.

It would work out for all involved though. Harry did have no interest in seeing his boyhood home ever again, and the lack of knowledge of her magical nephew and magical sister seemed to help Petunia grieve better than she might have otherwise. Dudley was still a

disaster at school, his teachers had told him that he shouldn't even bother to sit for his A levels, but it was too late in his school career for them to boot him out, Vernon had been using his business contacts and his own forceful personality to keep his son from being expelled, and now that Dudders was on the home stretch, the Smeltings staff was just content to see him run out the string. Petunia and her spawn would not be moved or otherwise relocated, if for no other reason than Rufus felt that they deserved what they got, after listening to some of Harry's stories about them. He would not spend another Knut of Ministry funds, already stretched to the bursting point, on monitoring Petunia and Dudley Dursley after Vernon was buried.

For his part, Harry barely blinked an eye. His number one childhood enemy was now dead, at the orders of his number one adulthood enemy, and while he loved irony as much as the next man, he just filed it away as old business and got on with his week. Perhaps it could be seen as a bit cold, but Sophie and the others, and especially the twins, thought it was a more than positive sign that he did not throw a party in celebration.

The day after the Vernon Dursley funeral, magical Great Britain held their now pointless election for Minister of Magic. Pointless because the only name on the ballot was that of Rufus Winston Scrimgeour. The January 15 deadline for entering one's name in the race was a hard deadline, and the death of Dumbledore a few weeks later changed that not a whit. Voldemort had ordered Borgin not to file, not dreaming that his ancient enemy would be killed before the election, so Rufus won in a walk, write-in votes were not allowed either. It was interesting really, it would have been the first Minister's race in over three decades to have only two candidates, if Dumbledore had lived, and there had never been a walkover election like the one they wound up happening.

All that was required to run for Minister was that the candidate be 35 years old or older, and pay the filing fee of 100 Galleons, which went toward the printing of the ballots and to pay those who counted them. Very simple really, and that simplicity always led to a few crackpots running just so that they could say that they had been a candidate for Minister. This kind of thing impressed foreigners especially. Bill Weasley was already being talked about as a candidate for the next

election, as he would just have turned 35 by the required time, and while his branch of the Weasley clan was widely seen as Rufus loyalists, a lot could happen in five years, and a lot would.

Minister of Magic was the only elected office in magical Britain, all other posts being on an appointment basis, including The Wizengamot and The Hogwarts Board of Governors, both of which were now stocked with Rufus' handpicked people. This is what had worried Dumbledore so much, even Fudge had never had this kind of control over the bureaucracy, not that the lesser man would have known what to do with it if he had. And Rufus Scrimgeour did know what to do with it.

This had not escaped Peter Pettigrew's notice either, and one of his new projects was how to effectively govern Great Britain once they had taken it over, once Harry had been dealt with once and for all. And that was as close to a mantra as Voldemort's organization had:

“Once Potter dies, everything else will fall into place.”

Rufus knew that they were thinking that way too, and while he had every faith that Harry would take out Voldemort and any other Death Eater dumb enough to take him on, The Minister still had contingency plans in case the lad failed. One thing he was not worried about was Harry coming after him, he had his young friend's measure there. Harry spent the election period, before and after, wondering what to do about Dumbledore's pensieve. He didn't really have the time to really do it justice, looking at all of those memories, and he also thought it best to view them with at least Arthur, if not Remus too, since he would undoubtedly need a lot of the people and events explained to him. The next League meeting was out, since it was at Hogwarts and the Quidditch Day, so he decided to wait until the April meeting. Nothing could happen during that one, could it?

Saturday, March 21, 1998

Hogwarts Great Hall

9:30 am

The entrance of the WWW three caused much less of a stir this time around, the novelty of it had worn off for their third official trip back to their old stomping grounds. They, Arthur, and Bill had breakfast with their friends, and most of the talk was spent on wedding plans for Ron and Hermione, it was just four months away. The Burrow would be the site, and Rufus had already agreed to marry off another Weasley son. The Gryffindors had the second game this day, so all the League Weasleys would be on patrol during the first game. It had been five weeks to the day since they had been back here, and Harry was finally loosening up about the whole thing. Neville took particular note of it.

“You don’t seem to be looking around as much as you did the last few times.”

“That’s because I have my staff on the lookout for anything unusual. I need to relax more when I’m over here.”

“Well there does seem to be an event most of time when you are.”

“Trouble does know where to find me.”

Because of the Dumbledore/Bones funeral and the dance after that, most everyone who had wanted to ‘experience’ Harry had gotten their fill, so he was mostly left alone, even the Creeveys, who were professional Harry worshippers, merely said hello and left it at that. Draco, on his way to get ready for his game, stopped by to shake hands and get a good luck from the DOM’s. This was to be his first, and of course only, game against his former House. Draco was only the second student in the last half century to switch Houses in mid-Hogwarts career, so this was quite an event. The betting money was strongly on Ravenclaw for the game, and the Quidditch Cup, since Slytherin was weakened by expulsions and Hufflepuff by a lack of decent players. In short Hufflepuff was the Hogwarts equivalent of Shawnee when it came to Quidditch, except that they had no Tim Spooneybarger to slow down the Quaffle flood.

Soon everyone was leaving for the game, and an uneventful 90 minutes passed by as the stubborn Snitch barely made any

appearance at all in the first hour of the game. The betting money was right on, as the weakened Slytherins barely even tried to score, and kept all three Chasers back on Defense, playing keep away in the rare times when they got the Quaffle. The Slytherin Beaters did everything they could to go after Draco, but a combination of Draco's flying talent and the Beaters lack of talent in general resulted in only three Bludger shots even grazing The Ravenclaw Seeker.....

Yes, Draco Malfoy the Ravenclaw Seeker, and no one in the crowd was used to that even now in his second game doing it, especially Narcissa Malfoy, sitting with her erstwhile ally Remus in the stands, tamping down years of Slytherin conditioning so that she could root for her flesh and blood against her own Hogwarts House. She managed a realistic looking cheer when Draco finally grabbed the Snitch, finishing off a 340-0 rout, and she was even polite to all of the other Ravenclaw parents after the game. It was a new 'high' for Narcissa, and a relieved Remus was all smiles afterward. It helped that it was Ravenclaw, and not one of the other two Houses. No, let's not kid ourselves, it's what made all the difference.

For his part, Draco did not rub it in to his old House, though that was more a function of most of the people he would want to rub it into not being there anymore. There were only three Slytherin Seventh Year students: Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, and Tracey Davis, and on the whole all of them got along better with Draco now than they did when he was a Slytherin. Blaise in particular did, since he was now the only Hogwarts student with his own room. Even Ernie MacMillan and Lisa Turpin, Head Boy and Girl, did not have that going for them.

All the while this was going on, Arthur, Bill, and the WWW three were outside patrolling, and finding nothing. Ron was still in the stadium, wanting to scout Slytherin, and had insisted that Hermione stay with him, not wanting her exposed to even the slightest danger. Hermione, flummoxed a bit by her fiancé being so take charge, somewhat meekly agreed, and Ginny and the others stuck around too, hoping to hear an argument, though they were to be disappointed there.

There were no incidents because the bad man did not really have the available manpower any longer. He was down to less than 110 Death

Eaters, and could only marshal the entire force on a few hours notice, not a few minutes. The losses he had sustained in every battle of the last two years had finally taken its toll, and recruiting was at an all-time low. Most of the magical world was under Fidelius now, at least most of the individual homes were, and Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, and The Ministry were considered to be as secure as they ever were. There was one mass assault plan that he and Pettigrew were kicking the tires on, but it was a month or more from being considered ready.

Lunch for the Gryffindor squad and friends was served in the stands, thanks to Dobby and Winky, Ron not wanting his people to have to even do the walk back to the school to dine in the Great Hall. Ginny had done the requisite rolling of the eyes, but in the end she understood that Ron had a bit of pressure on him. They had to annihilate Hufflepuff if they were to even have a chance at the Quidditch Cup, but they would also need Hufflepuff to defeat Ravenclaw.....not bloody likely, but hope was hope, and nothing would happen without a win here.

Harry and the twins said very little about Quidditch during the lunch, both from wanting to see Ron in Captain mode and from the suspicion that he wouldn't take too kindly to any unsolicited advice, and Ron did not solicit any. The hard game had been back in October, and the Gryffindors had learned some valuable lessons from it. Even Ginny usually let up on her brother in front of the team, and today was no different. Instead she spent her time lobbying her father to pressure Remus into letting her go to the last Quidditch/Quodpot weekend in June at Great Lakes. It was to be the week after the four school Olympics, and just two weeks before the gang took their NEWT's, so it would be a busy time. Arthur knew that it wouldn't just be her going, it would be all five of them, or at least all five wanting to, and he promised to do his best with the Headmaster, who was just now being told by Rufus and Travis that the giant brigade, all five members of it, would be taking up station around Hogwarts for the rest of the academic year, and probably beyond that. The giants had been getting a Ministry orientation/deprogramming for the last month, and were finally up to speed on what their new duties would entail, and just who they were allowed to attack. They would only enter the upper floors of Hogwarts itself upon direct invitation of a staff member,

quarters would be prepared for them on the ground floor, and they would eat in The Great Hall along with everyone else.

Remus took this in with the air of someone who knew that he had no good reason to say no, even after being told that an initially incredulous Bane had eventually agreed to not attack the giants if they wandered into the Forbidden Forest. This gave Hagrid hope that Grawp could come back to live there, but Travis shot that down immediately. Bane and his people were willing to put up with this new group of giants, but they positively HATED Grawp, who was a bit dim after all, and not too discerning in his food choices if left to his own devices. Hagrid wouldn't let it go though, and would immediately march out to the Forbidden Forest to try and reason with Bane, missing the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff match.

Not that there was much to miss as it happened. The Snitch, perhaps just wanting to torment Draco Malfoy before and after, made an initial appearance five minutes in, and Ginny would snag it at the 22 minute mark, for a 300-20 Gryffindor victory. Both the Hufflepuff goals were scored on penalty shots, still Ron's weak spot after three years, and Natalie McDonald scored a dozen goals for Gryffindor. The Slytherin team, strong even without Draco a year ago at this time, had hemorrhaged their four best players from that team, and the three remaining veterans weren't very good. Ron was initially a bit irritated that Ginny had caught the Snitch so quickly, but she reminded him that Hufflepuff Seeker Megan Jones was no slouch, having gotten it against Slytherin in October, and she just could not afford to take any chances with the win. Now Gryffindor would need a miracle to win the Cup, with the next match in early June, the same weekend as the four school Olympic competition at Salem. So no sneaking off to watch for Harry, not that he wanted to anymore, since he didn't want to see Gryffindor officially lose the Cup.

After the match was over, and the team had a chance to shower, Ron, Ginny, and a reluctant Harry, met with representatives from the BQL, the thirteen team league that encompassed Great Britain and Ireland. It was considered to be the best league in the world, considering how small an area it was, and drew players from the entire British Commonwealth, aside from Australia, which played in the Australasian League. There was also a fledgling league in Africa, that

struggled because the best South African and Zimbabwean players played in Britain, and one that encompassed the rest of Europe, which was where Viktor Krum played and starred. South America did not have a league, with their best magical athletes going for muggle soccer, their few Quidditch players played in the American league. The representatives were ostensibly there to meet and talk to Ron, the only Seventh Year player from his particular game who had a shot at going professional. These people had met with Draco during lunch, as well as a couple of the other Ravenclaw graduates to be.

They were frank and honest with Ron during the 30 minute meeting, saying that his now semi-famous name would certainly help him, and the fact that he was the only Seventh Year Keeper at Hogwarts was a bonus too, some teams only drafted British players. But they, to a man and woman, told him that he was not ready for the BQL yet, at least not as a starter. The Hogwarts Chasers this year, on all teams, were just not very good, so his one shutout, and the game just played, did not count for as much as he might have hoped. He had three years as a starting Keeper, and that was decent enough, Oliver Wood, because of Chamber of Secrets cancellation, had only really had three and a half, and being Captain the last two years was a plus for Ron. Ron's intangibles, for those that valued them, were off the charts.

Oh he would get drafted they said, there was no doubt about that. Being the son of the Wizengamot Head would ensure that, and they acknowledged that he did have a lot of promise. But there was no team in the league that would be willing to throw him in there as a starter for at least a couple of years, if not longer. By comparison, Oliver Wood had been stuck behind the BQL's best Keeper for two years, before she went back to Canada in early retirement, Wood likely would have started much sooner for most of the other teams.

"So would it be a better idea for me to go to America for a bit and get some seasoning?"

John Terry, manager of the English National Quidditch Team, handled the response.

“That depends Ron. If you want to play right away, or at least get into games, then yes, that would be your best bet. But you are good enough to get on a roster here, and who knows what could happen with injuries or the like. The pay is better over here, even for a sub in our league versus a starter in theirs. But what you need most is game experience, against Chasers who can challenge you. I don’t know how good the American Chasers are, Harry here could probably give you a more reliable account of them than I could, but you would have game experience over there that you would need injury to get over here.” All eyes turned to Harry.

“Am I supposed to say something here?” Nods all around seemed to indicate yes.

“In our school last year, there were five Chasers that could keep up in a Hogwarts game, and you’ve seen three of them play for Gryffindor at other positions. The other two, the only ones still playing Chaser right now unless I do something rash, would start for any Hogwarts House right now.” The other three, of course, were the WWW three.

“What about the American league?”

“A developing one from everything I’ve been told, but the owners are rich and there to stay. There are only four teams, so only the best players from our Quidditch teams in the four schools make those rosters.”

“Will you be playing there?” They all assumed that he would be, so Ron really was the reason that they were there. Harry decided that they deserved a little honesty.

“That’s where I’m leaning right now, though I reserve the right to change my mind before the deadline.” Harry had taken care to get a salary guarantee in writing from AQA Commissioner Janet Evans, so that no fast ones could be pulled, he didn’t need the money, but there was an issue of trust involved. There were no guarantees that his team to be would draft Warrick and Ron, but the AQA knew that Harry could just sit out a year and go back into the BQL draft if they

screwed him over, or he could sign a one year contract for the Australasian League, which had no hands off agreement with any of the other leagues.

“Any truth to the rumors that they’re giving you your own team?”

“Nope, at least it’s not something that I’ve suggested to them.”

They took this in with interest, and then moved on to Ginny. She was in much the same position as Ron, though with the advantage of having a year to go before having to make a career decision. She was not considered good enough yet to make the BQL as a starter, but her intangibles were much the same as Ron’s, with one slight difference: Ginny was not sure whether or not she wanted to play professional Quidditch. She only vaguely hinted at this to the BQL people, but she and Jonas had talked long and hard about this. Ginny was leaning toward taking the Hermione deal with Harry and UVA, and perhaps playing in the AQA, but probably not. Ginny just did not love Quidditch as much as Ron and Harry did, and only really had played because all of her non-Percy brothers had, even Bill had played three years for Gryffindor as a reserve.

They liked her as a Seeker, but her record would be considerably improved if she did not lose a Snitch the next year, when all three of the opposing Seekers would be considered below her talent level. She accepted their advice with a smile and thanks, but otherwise said very little during the meeting. As they all got up to leave, Harry couldn’t resist a question.

“Where do you think Draco goes in the draft?”

There was no representative there from the Chudley Cannons, the worst team in the league, and likely holder of the top pick, so John Terry felt free to answer.

“He’s the best player coming out of Hogwarts this year, and his political situation has been settled. The Cannons need a Seeker, and since you won’t be coming back over, I’ll bet you a Galleon that they

take him.” Terry was surprised when Harry put out a hand, accepting the bet.

“Done.” They shook on it, and Harry held Terry’s hand there as the other men and women exited the room.

“There is one other thing I would like to ask you, if you have a moment.”

“Sure Harry, what’s on your mind?” He had a feeling that he knew what this would be about, and was immediately proven correct.

“How will me playing in the States affect my shot at making the National Team?”

“It won’t, as long as you dominate the competition the way you have. The fact that you excelled as Chaser for two games helps there too. I saw the first game you and the twins played together, very impressive. Your partners got more entreaties to turn professional after that, it was an outstanding game.” Harry got a lot of compliments on that particular game, and never tired of hearing about them. Fred and George had told him that they would have loved to have played pro, except for that they loved WWW that much more.

“For the record, my playing over there has nothing to do with the BQL, this is nothing more than a lifestyle choice.”

“I understand, and I don’t suppose I blame you. Now the National Team is all set for the World Cup this summer, your sister in law has probably told you as much. But if you want to come work out with us, help us prepare for the game, we would love to have you there. It can be prep work for you, a way to get acclimated.”

Harry knew that hearing this must be killing Ron, and resisted looking at him, but in this one instance he didn’t care. He had been playing high-level Quidditch for far longer than his friend had, and the opportunity to scrimmage with the best players in his country was too much to resist.

“Consider me in, though I’m not available until after the last weekend in June, that’s when our graduation is.” Terry’s bemused look told him that that little detail had already been factored in.

“Not a problem. We have a full reserve team anyway, and this would just be for orientation purposes. And no, I did not offer this deal to young Malfoy, who failed all three times he played against you, if I recall correctly.”

“You do, and whom you invite to train with you is your own business and none of mine, but thank you for saving me the curiosity of it all. I can be reached through WWW whenever you want.” This was going to be great, as no less than four players he had either played with or against would be competing in the World Cup: Oliver Wood for Scotland, Angelina, Roger Davies for Wales, and Tatum Walsh for Scotland. Walsh was another Ravenclaw player that Harry had technically been in a league with, but had never faced, Walsh having graduated in 1993, before Harry had gotten a chance to ever play Ravenclaw. This didn’t even count Viktor Krum, still considered the finest Seeker in the world.

“Good to know. It was nice to meet all three of you.” He shook hands with all them, and showed himself out.

And sure enough, Ron was slightly put out, some of that old jealousy had risen to the surface again. Harry could hear it now:

“But I’ve been a Quidditch fan all my life, he just fell into it! I should be the star! I should be the one getting asked to work with National Team.”

He knew that Ron would never say this in front of him, and pitied poor Hermione for what was coming. He knew that Hermione only just tolerated Quidditch, and that being with a professional, in whatever league he played in, was going to cause her some stomach pains at times.

Indeed Ron, forgetting that this whole ‘bringing Harry to the meeting’ was his idea in the first place, left after a hasty goodbye, while Ginny

just hugged Harry and wished him a safe trip back. There was a brief, hour-long, League meeting, and then Harry and Rob Graham, who had been visiting with his old friend Sarah Westbrook, made their trip back without any drama. Rob's girlfriend Sheila came along, the pair would be going out on the town in Boston after dropping our boy off.

Ron and Hermione would have their debate that night about what he was to do, after a truncated version of Ron's potential rant. Hermione, with only a continued allowance coming from her parents and the knowledge that she wouldn't have to pay for bed and board for four years, said that the ultimate decision had to be up to Ron.

"If you feel that you can play here, then stay here and play. You can live in Virginia and pretend to commute with portkeys. I doubt anyone will be checking too closely about whether or not you actually use them." The Ron/Hermione portkey budget would be their biggest expense, since officially they could only be gotten from The Ministry, and Ron would be under some scrutiny once his living arrangements were made public.

"I don't know Hermione, I know I shouldn't have pouted about Harry and all that, but it just gets me that things come so easily to him." The old refrain, and Hermione was comforted by the fact that it was a little halfhearted, like the battery in it was slowly dying.

"Ron, flying comes easily to him, that's it. Sophie's told me about his Black library reading, that's his hobby nowadays, reading about hexes, curses, and defensive spells. I doubt he's played a game of Exploding Snap since he left here. He works really hard to stay alive, it's not just natural. Can you honestly begrudge him something that comes naturally? Would you trade the first 11 years of your life for his?"

"No, of course not."

"His father and grandfather were professional players Ron, your parents barely fly at all, your mother likes it just about as much as I do. It's in his genes, the fact that you and your family could produce five professional level players is extraordinary." Percy, the only sibling

not to be on the Gryffindor squad, flew decently enough, but did not care for Quidditch, part of the contrariness of his personality.

“Wouldn’t it be seen as being on his coattails if I play on the same team over there as him?”

“Didn’t Harry say that the Commissioner woman says that you’re capable of playing in their league? I doubt she would have lied to him.”

“Wouldn’t she? To get him to stay over there?”

“I don’t know, ask Harry, he probably slipped something in her drink anyway.” She smiled when she said this, trying to lighten the mood, though it was a very Harry suggestion. It worked though, and Ron did laugh.

“Okay, okay, I’m done pouting now, and that was very funny. Not enough people give you credit for your sense of humor.”

“Only you give me credit for that.”

“Like I said, not enough. Would you have a problem with me staying over here to play? It would mean more money. I know Harry won’t charge us rent and for food and such, so we can build up a stake for when you’re done with university, and we can get our own place, in whatever country.” This was as close as Ron would get to acknowledging that he would be the sole breadwinner for at least four years, though he had quickly agreed long ago that Hermione would have a career of her own once she was done with university.

“You will be the one having to suit up in whatever uniform Ron. We’ll still be living in Charlottesville, so where you play doesn’t impact me at all, it only impacts you. I’ll support whatever decision you make, 100 percent, I promise.”

“Thanks for that. Let me talk it over with Bill one more time, then we can tell the others.”

Ron and Bill would have a long heart to heart about the decision the next night, with Hermione there of course. Bill would tell him that financially, it would be in his best interests to play in Britain, but only if he was committed to improving himself and his new 'job'. In fact Ron was looking forward to devoting all of his time to his favorite thing, and not having to bother with studying or attending classes. Bill also agreed that it would not look great for Ron to be seen as a Harry bargaining chip with the AQA, and that advice was all that was needed to push Ron over the edge and into the arms of the British league. He would send in his declaration papers on Monday morning, via Pig, and tell the Great Lakes based troops that night.

Harry told Ron that he supported him in whatever he did, period, which relieved Ron a great deal. Hermione too was thankful that Harry wasn't making a big deal about it, though she never suspected that Harry fully agreed with the coattail theory, and had only been ready to insist to as not to hurt Ron's feelings, or cause hassles with Hermione.

Plus, he had been wondering if Ron was really good enough to play for pay anywhere, let alone the BQL. He had not been impressed with the level of Chaser action he had seen Ron face, and it was only after the BQL people gave their opinions that he somewhat turned his view around. Everyone seemed pleased that it was all settled, and Ron was quietly very satisfied that he had decided to strike out on his own, so to speak. He knew that the Cannons would have the first pick in the second round, and resolved to write a letter to them, telling them about his lifelong passion about the team. One could dare to dream couldn't they?

As everyone went back to their respective schools, Warrick had one small point to raise to his roommate.

"You realize that I don't have any problem with you getting me on whatever team you go to, right?"

"Well you haven't objected at any point, so I didn't think so."

“I know I can play in our league, so let people say whatever they want.”

“Besides, our women won’t want you hitting Bludgers at me.” They both started laughing about that.

“That’s not an inconsiderable factor. You got in the first round, me in the second. Looks like either New York or Miami.” The two teams were the bottom two, and The Chronicle was openly speculating that they would both start tanking games as soon as Harry made his announcement, if that announcement went their way. The regular season was another six weeks, then the playoffs. The season was a bit compressed this year because the American National Team had qualified for the World Cup.

“I’m for Miami, I don’t like playing Quidditch in the snow unless it doesn’t actually count.”

“Hear hear. Just put in the fix and we’ll be all set.”

“No fixes, but be prepared for a threat to play in Sydney if they screw us.” Harry was sure that Warrick could play professionally, though the larger man needed good players around him almost as much as Ron did.

“Down Under?” Said in Warrick’s best Crocodile Dundee accent, that would probably get him a kick in the shins from most Aussies. Harry knew all about that, there had been an Australian family with a daughter his age in Little Whinging after the movie came out, and the poor little girl never heard the end of it.

“Please don’t do that if we go down there.”

“Yes Mom. You’re glad about Ron, aren’t you.”

“Yeah I am, and now you’re about to tell me why I’m glad, aren’t you?”

“Funny you should mention that.”

“Not that funny, but go ahead.”

“You don’t want to be responsible for how he plays, if he doesn’t wind up making a mark.”

“And the difference between him and you is.....”

“They’ve seen me play for seven years, I’m the most known quantity that they can scout. Ron would be coming over on reputation and because you’d want them to pick him.”

Harry smiled, Warrick had nailed it right on the head.

“You never saw me nodding my head in total agreement, right?” He was doing just that.

“Of course not, at least not in front of anyone born in Britain.”

“Fair enough. Now lets get to the Lounge, we have some poker playing to do.”

“No Dobby, let’s make this a fair game for once.”

“Fine, he can be the dealer.”

Dobby dealing poker had a lot of comedic possibilities, and they were realized for the next few hours, as a relaxing Saturday night was had by all. Even Harry, loaded to the gills with Dr. Pepper because of his early day, had a great time. He kept looking around at the Lounge, knowing that he was badly going to miss all of this.

Tuesday, March 31, 1998

Great Lakes

Today was Sophie's birthday, and unlike the year before, the breakfast singing of Happy Birthday was done to Dobby's satisfaction in one take. Harry too stood up, and a small announcement to make. He pulled out a sheet of paper.

"Today, besides being my darling Sophie's birthday, is also the deadline for me to apply to the British Quidditch Draft. This is my application form right here."

He then proceeded to rip it apart to the cheers of the students in the room, and the approving nods of the faculty. Like the BQL people, they had all assumed this decision, but it was nice to hear it out loud and in person.

"I look forward to continuing my Quidditch career right here in The United States." He would make no formal announcement to either The Chronicle or The Daily Prophet, but the British paper would note the next day that he was not on the draft list and a big story would hit the front page, though not done by Alicia.

Harry would not grant an interview specifically, but did take the unusual step of writing a letter to the editor, explaining why he picked the league that he did. It was a cross between a one-sided interview and a press release, and McCrae would later tell him that he admired the deviousness of it. The reaction it all was somewhat muted, most people figuring that The Boy Who Lived was now The Man Who Could Play Where He Pleased, or words to that effect.

Defense, like all NEWT subjects now, was all review, as the tests were less than three months off, and class time would be interrupted twice for Olympic participation. Ripley had been intimately involved in the OWL and NEWT test programs when he was an Auror, and today was the third time he had given a mock NEWT of sorts this term. This followed the February class where he had made everyone take their exact OWL examination over again. He had even written to Rufus in order to get Harry's OWL test questions, and Harry again re-did his Patronus Charm.

It was the first time he had seen Prongs in quite the while, and it had almost forced his happy moment out of his mind. Harry never cast his Patronus for sentimental purposes anymore, because he had Winky's painting of him and his parents, specially aged. He would gaze at it a lot during the rare moments he was alone in the trunk. It was ironic that even though he was surrounded by people who cared about him, and not in a school where people constantly pointed at his scar or whispered rumors about him, he still missed his parents and the life that he was denied even more. But every time he walked away from that painting, he was even more reinvested in killing Voldemort and bringing closure to this ordeal once and for all.

Muggle Studies that afternoon was another mock up of sorts, a mock trial. They were re-enacting a famous Michigan murder trial from the mid-80's. Ziegler was the judge, and Jonas was the lead prosecutor, with Cortez man Jake Bailey handling the defense. As part of Ziegler's wry sense of humor, he had Harry, the only one in the room to have ever killed anyone, as the defendant. He was also the only one who had ever been on trial, as ridiculous as his Patronus trial had been. The class got a nice laugh out of it, the roles had been chosen the week before, and for three hours, Muggle Studies Classroom C was a courtroom.

The Purdue bound Bailey, though not an especially great student on the whole, had a passion for courtroom dramas, in book, movie, or television form. Whenever had control of one of the Lounge televisions, one could count on a homemade L.A. Law tape coming out. He pulled out the entire arsenal of tricks this day, and somehow convinced the five person jury that Harry, despite his fingerprints all over the scene, the victim's blood on his clothes, and a shaky at best alibi, was not guilty of all charges. They returned with said verdict in five minutes time.

After which a horrified Jonas threatened to curse them all right there in the 'courtroom'. He went of a five minute, very loud, rant on the stupidity of the jury, and only did not get cited for contempt because Judge Ziegler was too busy laughing. Harry just leaned back in his chair and smiled, thinking that this was just what he needed to get him livened up on his sweetheart's birthday. Everyone agreed that this was the most fun class they had had all year, and greatly enjoyed

mocking the Junior Year students, who would not be getting the same treatment.

The gang skipped dinner and had a party down in the trunk, also including Marie's friends, Rick and Terry, Rachel Kessler, and Marty, Keisha, and Anna. This wasn't just for Sophie, at least the party theme, this had been done for all them that had turned 18 so far this year, with just Warrick, Jonas, and Harry to go. The Brits would come over the next night, due to trunk secrecy and all that. Harry and the twins had gone in together and gotten Sophie a karaoke machine as a present, not Harry's only one of the night, and since it was opened first, it was used pretty much all night long. It had as large a catalog as they could find, and Marty became the star of the night when he sang My Girl by The Temptations.

It helped that he could hit the high notes, since his voice hadn't yet broken.

Everyone cleared out by 9:00 pm, sensing that the lovebirds had some things to discuss in private. Everyone hugged Sophie and winked at Harry, but did no out loud speculating on their way out of the trunk. They instead waited until they got up to the room itself to start on the speculation. Warrick, with considerable help from Fred and George, had somehow convinced Dobby to hide out in the trunk, and then let them know after Harry had proposed. Dobby had agreed, as long as it happened before anything frisky happened. And he would not give them a full report, just a 'yes, it happened' time.

As Sophie was using the trunk's bathroom, Harry dug into his invisibility cloak for his stand alone present. When Sophie came out, he pulled her into a long hug, not their first of the day, and said:

"Happy Birthday darling." All the while, he had been fastening a necklace around her. It was a Celtic necklace called a Claddagh, nothing so expensive that she would feel guilty about it, but very classy looking.

"This is so beautiful, thank you." More hugging, and a kiss might even have been proffered and accepted.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Where did you get it?”

“I had Rebecca Biller get it for me, she and Travis are from Scotland, and there’s a really nice shop in Edinburgh that Travis told me about, it’s where he gets all her jewelry type presents, and their wedding rings and such. I figure I’m half Celtic, and I wanted to.....I don’t know, I wanted to honor that part of my heritage.”

“I love it.”

“Good, because I already tore up the receipt, I’m just a poor student you know.”

“I know you’re a poor student, fifth in the class, I mean really.” That wasn’t what he had been joking about of course, but they both laughed.

There was one more present to give, though it wasn’t really a present. As Sophie was still chuckling, Harry made one smooth move and both got on one knee and pulled a box out of his pocket.

“Sophie, I love you more than anything or anyone in the world. Will you marry me?”

This was the moment, and despite knowing that it was probably going to come any second now, Sophie Natalie Weir started crying.

Tears of happiness though, for the only man she had ever even thought about loving.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes.”

Harry put the ring on her finger, and drew her in close.

“This the happiest moment of my life.” It was hard to say whether or not her tears were on his face by themselves, or whether they were mixing with his own.

End Chapter

Author's Note: A couple of semi-minor mishaps in the last chapter: The biggest is that I had Peter Pettigrew not using the Killing Curse to kill Cedric. I really hate making Goblet errors, since it's my favorite book of the seven. I'm not saying it's the best book, I'm saying that it's my favorite. The other one is that I had, for a brief paragraph, Gryffindor playing Slytherin in Quidditch, when in fact they played Hufflepuff. No excuse for it, none. Oh, and upon rereading all of the books, I have blatantly misspelled Grindelwald and Weasley's Wizard Wheezes throughout both of my stories. You would hardly know that I've done any fact checking after discovering this, but I promise you that worse errors have been averted.

Tuesday, March 31, 1998, continued.

10:00 pm

Harry's trunk

Harry and Sophie held each other for a good long while, not having noticed that Dobby had popped upstairs to tell everyone, though the little elf had taken care to remain unseen or heard. After about five minutes, Harry pulled free.

"See, just because we knew it was going to happen, it didn't ruin the moment at all." They both started giggling, and Sophie kissed him.

"No it didn't at all, it was wonderful."

"That's what I wanted to hear." He sat down on the couch and gave a great happy sigh.

"That was nerve racking you know. I mean I knew that you were going to say yes and all, but.....it's a moment that only happens once in a lifetime, asking the woman you love to marry you."

She sat down too, half on his lap and half on the couch.

"Would you have preferred that I did the asking?"

“Not really, I’m something of a traditionalist when it comes to those things. My dad asked my mum, or so Remus told me one time, so I should be the one to ask you. Heck, Vernon probably asked Petunia.” Oh yes he did, if anyone was a stickler for tradition and form, it was Petunia.

“Pity you can’t invite her to the wedding, I’d love to see her reaction.” Sophie had met all of the still alive British players in our tiny story, all except Petunia and Dudley.

“She’ll be dead by the time we get married.” That elicited a gasp, and Harry quickly threw up a hand.

“That came out very wrong, I’m sorry. I don’t mean that I’ll be the one to do it, oh no. But if Voldemort went to all that trouble to take out Vernon, he won’t hesitate to go after her or Dudley, kill of the Blood Protection once and for all.”

“All that trouble? Didn’t he just have someone sneak in and sabotage the place?” Good point, but Harry had a counter, he had been thinking a lot about this.

“The Blood Protections had expired on Privet Drive, he could have walked in there and Avada Kedavra’d them to his heart’s content, nothing would have happened.”

“Yikes.”

“Let’s stop talking about those people and decide when we’re going to tell your parents.” She was all for that plan.

“Is there anyway we can pop over there on Easter Sunday?” They pondered that for a tick or five, and Harry shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t think we have much choice, it should be in person, and we shouldn’t wait until summer.” There was no Easter holiday break this year, only the regular weekend, because of the extra week being taken off of classes for the four school Olympics.

“I’ll put something in the mail tomorrow, tell them we’re coming for a few hours. We can pretend that we’re spending Easter at Jonas’ or something.” The old standby, and Michael Steele was always willing to provide a phone call excuse for them.

“I love you.” A very welcome abrupt segue this time, and Sophie beamed at hearing her first I love you as an engaged woman.

“I love you too.”

“Let’s go up and tell the others shall we.”

“Yes let’s.” They got up, and went up the trunk ladder and into a very packed dorm room. Sophie just shook her head.

“We are nothing if not predictable. Harry and I would like to formally announce our engagement.” Harry put his arm around her as everyone cheered. All the girls hugged Sophie, the guys all shook Harry’s hand. Harry had one thing to say.

“Just for the record, every guy in here, save Marty, had five years to see the light and try to snag my Sophie. I have just two things to say to this:”

“You’re all idiots.”

“And thank you very, very much for being idiots!”

To much applause from the girls, and Marty even had a rejoinder, he rather liked it when Harry singled him out.

“So Sophie, you’re saying it’s too late to ask you out then?”

It’s a good thing there was no drinking of Snapple when he said that, because it would have been sprayed all over the room from the laughter.

“Yes Marty, you should have said something at a Thanksgiving or Christmas before Harry moved here.”

“Well excuse me for not being a nine year old Casanova.” He was grinning when he said it, and Harry just reached up and patted his shoulder.

“I’m sure that Anna can be your own version of Sophie. Now Rachel, since you’re single and all, is there a Brit I can fix you up with? Is Charlie too old for you at 28?” Rachel had just turned 17 a few weeks earlier, the day of the Vernon Dursley funeral in fact, and when she didn’t immediately say no.....

“Hold on to that thought then, something to muse on.” Harry liked the idea, and Charlie’s contract at the Dragon Preserve was up at the end of the year, however unlikely it was to amount to anything. Rachel was blushing a bit, and now taking a good ribbing from the other girls. This was not her usual crowd, but Harry had slowly suckered her in with WWW, he liked having her around, she was different enough from the other women to add something to the mix. She had heard enough stories to know who Charlie was, and she was rather attracted to the twins.....

“Just because you’re engaged, doesn’t mean you need to play matchmaker.”

“Of course I don’t NEED to, I just feel like it.”

“I’m afraid of dragons you know.”

“Oh like you’ve ever seen one in person. My first in-person dragon was a lovely experience, I stole her egg, and she raked me on the shoulder, it was love at first sight.” Harry was being very expansively giddy right now, his first minutes as an engaged man, and Warrick picked up on it. He had even forgotten about Norbert, Hagrid’s baby dragon during First Year, in his giddiness.

“All right folks, the show is over, back to your rooms before Harry volunteers to buy engagement rings for all of us.” That did give Harry

an idea, well, more than one actually. He only voiced one of them right now.

“Hey that would be a great prank idea, fake engagement rings that spray some kind of liquid or something. I’ll have to talk to the twins about this the first chance I get.” A few people rolled their eyes, but only those not intimately involved with WWW. The twins, with their new goblin assistance, had been putting all of their time toward inventing new pranks and modifying old ones, not needing to actually make them anymore. They would take this idea and run with it, though Harry drew the line at putting his name or Sophie’s on this one. The most popular one would spray perfume, and so wasn’t really a prank, but there were all kinds of possibilities that could be ordered. By summer it would be a top 10 seller for the shop, still trailing behind Harry Potter’s DIY Howler Kit, the most popular item at all five schools at which it was sold.

Soon everyone left, and the four guys in Cortez 7B started doing their night-time routine things. Harry and Warrick were going back down into the trunks of course, and once there, Harry had a question/offer.

“So when are you joining me in engagement-land?”

“Do inquiring minds need to know?” Warrick didn’t mind though, Harry rarely ragged on him about that.

“Again, it’s not a question of need.”

“We’re going to go shopping for it next month in Milwaukee, just like you people are assuming.” And yes, Sophie and Harry weren’t the only ones who were assuming.

“Just to let you know, if the ring you decide on doesn’t fit into your budget, your friendly roommate will bridge the gap.” He assumed that if Warrick took him up on it, his roommate would insist that it be a loan, but Harry was more than willing to give the money, it wouldn’t even make a dent of a dent.

Warrick stopped pacing, and had a thoughtful look on his face.

“I have a lot of money saved up, and Uncle Antonio offered to loan me the rest as well. But thank you dude, I really appreciate your willingness to do that.” That was what Harry really cherished about Warrick, if you did him a favor or offered to do one for him, he didn’t fight about it, he just said thank you, whether he took you up on it or not.

“Don’t worry about it, hell, I’ll pay for the ring if you consider it a wedding present.”

“I’ll pass on that one, I should put up as much as I can towards it. Let’s talk about this more before the trip. When is it again?”

“I want to say it’s April 25, but it might be the week before.”

“Over three weeks then, plenty of time. Anyway, I should get over there, and you have things to do yourself.”

“Yes I do, yes I do. And after you and Reiko do what you need to do, the four of us need to talk about wedding dates and such. You know, who goes first and all that.”

“Fair enough, that should be a fun conversation. At least ours doesn’t need to have a muggle mix like yours will.” Eh, not so fast Warrick, his parents and grandparents would have something to say about that, as he would soon find out.

“I’m dreading that part of it already. Anyway, have a good night, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Have fun dude.” And with that, Warrick got into the trunk floo and zipped over to the one in Sophie’s/Reiko’s room, getting there about 30 seconds before Sophie was to take the trip herself.

And yes, a fun night was had by all.

The next morning Harry was notified that the trial of Stephen Dale, his would be killer in The Leaky Cauldron way back when, had been set

for April 20, a Monday. Dale's grandfather was one of the few Wizengamot members not a part of Rufus' faction, and that had emboldened the young man into refusing any plea bargains at all. Harry would be required to give testimony, and with luck, would be back in time for his first class that day, just minus a little sleep. Hopefully he wouldn't have to kill anyone in a duel, but the possibility was there.

The Brits were told the next night, with Arthur and Molly taking the late night trunk floo trip over to help celebrate the good news. After Ron and Hermione getting engaged three months earlier, no Brit had a leg to stand on, objection-wise, and wisely none of them tried. Molly made a half hearted attempt to pimp The Burrow, or even Godric's Hollow as a wedding spot, but Harry wouldn't have it.

"The Hollow is under Fidelius, how am I supposed to explain all of that to a man, my future father-in-law, that thinks his daughter is a muggle?"

Molly had some counters to that, but ultimately let it go. It was another fun night to be had by all, and everyone was looking forward to June and the Jefferson Quidditch game, which would be their next big get-together, sans the Hogwarts DOM's. Those five would be coming for the Great Lakes graduation though, war permitting. Remus had told them that with so many of the faculty going, and all of Harry's specifically invited teachers had said yes, of course they would come, there would be relatively little danger on the portkey trip. Remus did, via Arthur, have one request.

"He would like you to at least invite Hagrid. He will probably say no, but for form and all that." He didn't think his request would get much of a positive response, and was quickly proven correct.

"No, he has never so much as done me the courtesy of hearing my side of things. I've written him, tried to talk with him in person, he won't budge. Ron and Neville tell me that he won't even say my name. No Arthur, Hagrid and I are done, and he has no one to blame but himself. Only McGonagall was as loyal to the old man as Hagrid was, and she and I managed to make peace. And that's because she was

adult enough to meet me halfway. He won't, and so I won't invite him to anything, period."

Arthur had assumed as much, and actually had done a pretty good predicting job to Remus, he had even figured on Harry using McGonagall as an example.

"Well I had to pass along the message in any case, and I don't blame you."

"Thank you, both for the message and the kindred feeling there."

"I am very proud of you my boy, and for reasons that have nothing to do with Voldemort." That was a bit unexpected, and Harry smiled.

"The feeling is very mutual Arthur, I promise you." Molly just stood there beaming.

Sunday, April 12, 1998

Casa de Weir, Chicago

12:15 pm

Harry and Sophie had arrived in good order, after a quick floo from Murray's office to Flackter Alley, and then again to the floo station in Chicago nearest to the Weir's new home. Peter had assumed his Federal Judgeship less than three months earlier, and the new place was still being broken in. They made the walk in relative silence, holding hands and enjoying the nice spring day. Sophie still did not feel any more comfortable here than at the old place, and so she rang the doorbell.

Mother Weir answered it, with somewhat of a surprised look on her face.

"Sophie, this is your house, you don't have to ring the bell." Jason had said the exact same thing last summer at the old place, which had been a lot bigger than this one, but this was a Chicago of higher

real estate prices, and lifetime appointment or not, Peter had taken a hefty pay cut. It was smaller, with just three bedrooms, and Wendy's garden had been transported to the back, even if it was still a bit chilly outside.

"Sorry Mom, it's still a little strange." They walked in and saw that Jason had brought a woman home with him. Everyone was introduced, and Jason's girlfriend, named Allison Porter, seemed friendly enough, it turned out that they had been together for three months now, something Jason's one page monthly letters had omitted. Sophie, so that she could take her left hand out of her jacket pocket, decided that a Harry like frontal assault was apropos here.

"Mom, Dad, everyone not Mom and Dad.....Harry and I are engaged." They expected the jaws to drop, and were not disappointed.

Well not Wendy's at least, she was very careful to keep her face composed. She had been the one to read Sophie's letter, and Mother Weir had had a sneaking suspicion of what was to come. She also realized that the ice under her feet with Sophie was still on the thin side, Sophie's issues with her were reaching Dumbledorian proportions, or they would be if Dumbledorian was in fact a word.

Peter Weir just looked flabbergasted, and as the lone muggle family member who was not, to a degree, afraid of Harry, let loose a question.

"But you're so young, you only just turned 18." He and Wendy had sent a present for the first time in years: A nice check, which Sophie was to use the next time she had a chance to go shopping, her mother just assuming that every 18 year old woman liked shopping, magical or muggle. Pay cut or not, Mother and Father Weir were quite well off, not realizing that their son-in-law to be was now worth over \$100 million.

Harry fought hard to conceal a smile, since he himself had over three months to go before hitting 18. He let Sophie answer, just smiling placidly.

“We’re not getting married tomorrow Dad, and before any of you ask, we don’t HAVE to get married. Six months from now, my belly will look just like it is now.” Sophie herself liked the deftness of that series of hints, and the looks on the faces of Ned, Jason, and Allison clearly said that that’s what they had been thinking. That stopped Peter for the time being, as Wendy came forward and hugged Sophie again.

“This is wonderful news honey, congratulations.” This seemed to snap the younger muggles out of their stupor, and everyone else came forward with congrats. Peter shook Harry’s hand, and took him aside.

“You seem like a fine young man Harry, I’m glad that you’ll be joining the family.”

“Thank you sir, I was hoping that you would react that way.” And he was, the last thing he needed was more tension with these people.

“I’ll forgo the fatherly threats, since I doubt that they would do much good anyway. I do have to ask though, how are you going to support Sophie? I mean a young man in college.....”

Harry gaped at him a little bit, he would have thought that Wendy would have shared the information about him being quite well off, and then said so.

“I’m sorry sir, you just caught me by surprise a little, I would have thought that Mrs. Weir would have told you. I inherited some money from my parents when they died, and the interest has accrued very well. I also got some money from my godfather, and the man who sort of looked out for me after I became an orphan. I won’t be so crass as to give you an amount, but I’m pretty well off.” The relief on Peter’s face was palpable, no doubt he had been having visions of supporting the two of them during their college years.

“That’s good to hear, I’m glad that you can support Sophie and yourself. When and where for the wedding?” The typical fatherly

questions, and Harry would have been surprised not to have been pulled aside.

“When is still up in the air, we have other weddings going on in our circle and we need to debate on dates. As for where, we were figuring Springfield. My people over there would love to come over here and see America.”

“You won’t want it in Britain?” This caught Peter a little off guard this time, part of him had been hoping for a trip across the pond.

“I wouldn’t object to it, but on the whole it would probably be easier to have it here.” Harry wanted no part of any Weir coming to Britain while he was there, wanting to see where he grew up, and to meet all of the Weasleys that they had heard about. Harry’s imagination could not quite get to explaining The Burrow to a muggle, or even a squib, as Peter was and Harry quietly suspected that either Jason, Ned, or both were.

“That’s fine, though I will insist on paying for the wedding.”

It was times like this that reminded Harry that this man had kicked Sophie out of the house for five years, and was only being nice now because he had been Obliviated. Part of Harry wanted to rage about his lack of generosity then, but he kept his cool. He knew that Peter wouldn’t understand that argument, and even if told about the Obliviation, probably would not believe it. It was the same reason he had left Fudge alive, even if he had knowledge of the man’s exact location, which Travis and Rufus were very reluctant to give him. Here he simply smiled and nodded in agreement to Peter’s wedding payment idea.

“I was hoping that you and Mrs. Weir would help us organize things. We’ll have plenty of notice for everything, there’s no way this happens before Christmas, and probably it won’t be until next summer. I’m sure the mail is very fast between here and Charlottesville, and I imagine that we’ll run up a healthy telephone bill as well.”

“How many people can we expect from Britain?”

“Good question, off the top of my head there are no less than a dozen Weasleys and spouses, they’re my surrogate family over there, and figure on a couple dozen more besides that. I’ll cover the cost of transport and bed and board of course.” By now Jason and Ned had joined them, with the three women all admiring Sophie’s ring and going to the kitchen to get some drinks for everyone. Peter excused himself for a moment to talk to Wendy, and the brothers turned to Harry. Jason put his arm tentatively on Harry’s shoulder.

“Congratulations bro, welcome to the family.”

“Yeah Harry, we’re all really happy.” The two of them looked it too, and Harry just smiled.

“Don’t worry guys, she really isn’t pregnant.” Ned smirked a little, while Jason tried to look innocent.

“I wasn’t thinking about that at all. Can your people over there really pull off a muggle wedding.” Jason rather liked the term ‘muggle’, and had taken to using it when he talked with Ned.

“They’ll be fine, they’re not as backward with you people as they used to be, due in no small part to their interactions with Sophie and our friends over here.” Harry badly wanted to believe this, and couldn’t really put his finger on who would be a problem, other than perhaps Molly, the only muggles she had met recently were the staff at Wilton’s both times. Arthur, since his ascension to the Head of Muggle Affairs, had become far less excitable about the muggles that he saw everyday during his job, and Harry was convinced that he could hold it together for a ceremony and the reception afterward.

“The only problem will be coming up with careers for all of them, since none of them have jobs that you types would have. Well I guess the twins and I do technically own a toy company, so that’s three of us down.”

They talked in this vein for a little while, interrupted eventually by lunch, as everyone let the three young men bond a little. Ned and Jason were all about asking questions in regard to UVA, and whether or not muggles like themselves could take portkeys with some degree of safety. They knew that they would be taking one there and back to the Great Lakes graduation, and were a bit hesitant about it.

“Look, from what I understand, you’ll be sick for about 10 minutes afterward, and by sick I mean nauseous. After that you’re fine, there are no lasting effects.”

“If you say so.” That was Ned, he looked the most dubious about the whole thing.

“This’ll be your only chance to see a magical school for awhile, at least until your nieces and nephews go to wherever we send them.” Ned had one question in regard to that that had been kind of eating at him for a few months.

“What are the chances of Jason or I having a magical kid?”

And the penny dropped, Harry could tell that Ned had been wanting to ask that question for some time, and he took a minute to compose his response.

“No one really knows how muggleborn magicals happen, but we all assume that there must be some magical blood in there somewhere. Your paternal grandparents are both magical, so your father was very likely to be one, even if he did not turn out to be. The fact that your father wasn’t lessened the chances for the three of you, so only one of you turning out to be magical isn’t that out of the ordinary, especially since your mum is a muggle. Let’s just say that while you shouldn’t be shocked if any of your kids turn out to be magical, you should figure on them not being.” Both of them looked a little relieved to hear that, which is the opposite reaction Harry had been expecting, he had assumed that they would be disappointed.

“So you and Sophie will have magical kids then probably.”

“More than likely, though you never know. Only two of my grandparents were magical, and given that Sophie’s are the same, I wouldn’t be surprised if we had a squib. Well yes I would since I’m considered to be on the high end of the power scale, but the odds are better than, say, my brother Bill and his wife, who are both purebloods, I’d keel over if they had a squib, and I wouldn’t be the only one.” That got them started on genealogy for a time, and then lunch was served, so no talking about agic-may around Peter and Allison.

As they got up from the table, and Sophie and Harry surreptitiously looked at their watches to see how quickly they could leave, Wendy took Harry aside.

“You make Sophie very happy, and for that, I’m glad that you had enough problems in Britain to come over here and meet her. I know how that must sound.....”

“Oh I’ve felt the same way more than a few hundreds times ma’am.”

And he had, and there was probably no greater push and pull in Harry’s life than that: All that Dumbledore had forced on him, with the Dursleys and Hogwarts, had pushed him over to The United States so that he could meet Sophie. And not just Sophie, but Warrick, Drew, and the others, people who never lectured him, but still talked him out of doing stupid things, people who were pleased when he did well at something, rather than be huffy and jealous about it. So the debate in Harry’s mind, and this was only in his mind so far, was how mad could he really be at Dumbledore now? Wouldn’t it repudiate Sophie to still hold a grudge? After all, if Dumbledore had not done what he had done, Harry never would have met Sophie, or any of the others. It was hard for Harry to rationalize it sometimes.

“And what of this Voldemort person I’ve been told about. I understand that there is a reckoning there.” More communication with Duncan and Leslie Weir apparently, Peter’s parents, who Harry was hoping to meet at his and Sophie’s graduation.

“That will be over by summer ma’am, either he’ll die or I will.”

“You don’t seem worried though.” Which worried her a little bit.

“I’m not, and to be honest I can’t tell you why either. I just know in my heart that I won’t lose. Because I have a lot to live for, as opposed to Voldemort, who just wants to avoid death for the principle of it. That’s why I’ll win Mrs. Weir, that’s why I ‘ll live.”

And there you have it.

Harry and Sophie were out of there by 3:30, taking a taxi this time back to Jonas’, where they would floo to Flackter Alley and then on back to school. On the way home they qualified it as a good visit, but all the baby talk had rattled Harry a little. He and Sophie had agreed that no little ‘uns were to happen before she graduated from university, but he was still unprepared for the assumption that just because marriage was taking place, babies would immediately follow. Thank God for Kiplinger’s.

Harry and Sophie got back a few minutes after Drew and Marie. The latter two had been at his sister’s wedding the past two days, over in Boston. Drew, looking a bit tired, told everyone that it went just fine. He and his sisters had barely spoken, but only because of the hullabaloo of the wedding and getting ready for it. He had stood up as a groomsman for the blueblood ass that he couldn’t stand, but somehow managed not to hex him in the back.

In a lot of ways it had been a preview of Harry and Sophie’s wedding, as there were a lot of muggles there, and the magicals needed to be on their best behavior. Given that the father of the bride was a high ranking Auror, there were no incidents. His other sister would be married in July, and Drew was already dreading it. Everyone else had stayed at school, needing the time for their NEWT’s, or in the case of Marty and Keisha, not wanting another FAQ session with their relatives during Easter dinner. They had all, at Harry’s velvet coercion, braved Professor Mendoza’s morning church service, and Mendoza was actually pretty interesting with his sermon this day. Most of the gang was religious to a point, but they just didn’t like listening to Mendoza, only Harry and Drew were even semi-regulars at the

services. Harry, after growing up in a non-church environment in Dursley-ville, had decided to at least give it a shot.

The next night was a celebration in the trunks, as the gang skipped dinner so that they could celebrate Neville's new position as Associate Professor of Herbology at The Salem Witches Institute, to start the Monday after graduation. He had passed his interview with flying colors, and Shupe had hired him on the spot, Neville having already unwittingly passed the requisite background check by the American magical government. The only qualifier was that he had to at least get an E on his NEWT for the hire to be valid, even if he would already be working with the summer students when the scores came. They made it an E because Shupe felt that everyone has bad testing days. He himself had come within one question of losing his Defense NEWT O, and look where he had gotten to. The Associate teaching position was done at all of the North American schools, the gang had had none in their Novice year by strict chance, and there were none now, due to the stability of the faculty.

Neville didn't care about any of that, he was just relieved that his post-Hogwarts career was starting to sort itself out. He and Jonas, with Hogwarts girlfriends for another year, would room together at UVA, and they and their ladies could be seen animatedly talking over things. Harry was bursting with pride for Neville too, he could honestly say that he had not knowingly lifted a finger to make this happen, Neville had done it all on his own, with his own talent. Harry was immodest enough to admit that he had been an influence on Neville the last couple of years, and while Harry would always wish he had done more about it earlier, it was a proud night for the E-gang indeed.

Tuesday, April 14, 1998

Muggle Studies Classroom C

3:50 pm

Harry's Muggle Studies class was right in the middle of a free wheeling discussion on the use of publicity in politics and law when there was a knock on the door. This caught everyone by surprise

since it was a very rare occurrence for class to be interrupted. Ziegler opened the door to find Dobby.

“I am sorry Professor Ziegler sir, but I did not want to just pop in.” He was frantically motioning for Harry to come over. Harry, wondering what the hell had happened now, got up and went over to the two of them, as Dobby very quietly said:

“The Listening Charm at Tecumseh was tripped, they are coming in a few hours, they leave at 2:00 am in the morning.”

Now Ziegler understood what all this was about, and one look at the crafty expression on Harry’s face was all he needed.

“If you need to leave Harry, go ahead.” Basic Combat member Harold Abrahams was in this class too, and Harry motioned for him to get up to the door too, filling him in once he got there. Harry appreciated the offer, but was shaking his head no.

“No sir, an extra hour won’t make any difference. What else did you find out Dobby?”

“Only that they are taking a portkey and then walking the rest of the way into the wards. Oh, and it will be 2:00 am our time, so they will be leaving at midnight.” A bit stupid, or so Harry thought, putting your troops on short sleep. Of course Great Lakes had done the same, aside from Fred and George, but Harry had been outvoted on that little detail.

“How sure are you of all this? Could they be pulling a drag on us?” This was Harold Abrahams, and Harry agreed that it was a valid question, as Dobby answered.

“I understand your point Mr. Harold, and I agree. So I went there myself and spied upon the Burke and Hill people, and they were dead serious. It is happening tonight.” So it would be both Defense teachers coming, interesting. Greenleaf had been offered a spot on the Great Lakes attack squad, but he had demurred, saying that it should be the students doing all of the lifting, heavy or otherwise.

“All right Dobby, go alert Professor Murray and Professor Heyman, tell them that we will be by after dinner to put the plan into effect.”

“Yes Harry.” This time Dobby popped away, and Ziegler just smirked at Harry.

“How badly are you guys going to paste them?”

“Very, very badly. Dr. Carter won’t be needed though, I hope.” Harry would say no more, and he and Harold went back to their seats. The class had been confused when Harry went up there, but when Abrahams did as well, they put two and two together. The Basic Combat folk would answer no questions though, and the class discussion resumed for the remaining hour and change of class. As they were letting out, Harry took Harold aside:

“Let’s meet in the Library at 7:30, and we can go over final plans.”

“Gotcha, this is going to be a lot of fun.”

“Well for us it will be.” They shared a smile, and went on their way back to Cortez and Shawnee, idly chatting about Quidditch as they went up the stairs, Harry peeling off to go to his Lounge. He met Sophie and Reiko there, them having Advanced Transfiguration during this time period, and he found out that Dobby had already filled them in, as well as Drew and Claudia, not present. Harry went over to have a chat with Rachel Kessler, who besides being WWW’s Great Lakes manager, was also a member of the Junior Year Basic Combat class. He explained what was going on, and she smiled.

“I can’t wait for this, it’ll be epic.”

“Well let’s not get cocky, but I agree. You, Sophie, and I will go outside right after dinner and throw up some wards. Nothing too extravagant, but we need to have some up so that they won’t be suspicious on how we were so ready for them.”

“Why didn’t Salem have that kind of thing up?”

“They did, but we flew in and avoided them, or so Raymond Parker told me. And yes, they were very cocky.” Sophie came up to them just now, and overheard the cocky comment.

“There’s no substitute for having someone who’s actually walked it.”

“Well I had never actually invaded a school before you know. The Ministry yes, but they just let me walk right in.”

It was a measure of Harry’s maturity, and the distance from the events, that he could joke about the Department of Mysteries fiasco that had lost him Sirius. Ultimately it had been McCrae of all people to help him with that, when he reminded Harry that without the DOM, there would have been no evidence of Voldemort’s return, and very probably a second Ministry attempt on his life, one that would be less likely to miss.

Rachel knew nothing of this, and took it for a nice joke. Harry sent her off to let the other Junior Basic Combat folk know. It was part of the deal for the exercise that the Juniors could not be in on the attacking parts, but anyone was allowed to defend, and Harry and Drew had allowed for a big part to play for them.

Between dinner and the Library meeting, Harry, Sophie, and Rachel picked random spots outside the front door to put Alarm Charms down. They could have just laid down a carpet of them, if they had had more people outside, but Sophie had suggested an off kilter pattern. She reasoned that if the Tecumseh people, there would be 10 students, two professors, and four Tulsa based Aurors, started scanning for the Alarm Charms, it would slow them down if they were constantly stopping and starting, and it might even frustrate them into doing something rash.

Harry loved it when his attackers did rash things, especially when he goaded them into doing them.

Next was a secret trip to Tecumseh, where Steve Atwood was waiting for Harry and Sophie in Aylesworth Corner. This had been a pre-arranged visit, and was Atwood's idea. Harry wanted to make sure of this though.

"Are you sure about this Steve?"

"Totally sure dude, once you wipe them out I'll get a lot of hard questions. Obliviating me is the best thing to do here. That way, even if they give me Veritaserum, I won't be held accountable."

"But you won't understand why I gave you a raise on your commission rate." He cracked a smile.

Steve's face, already smiling, broke into an impossibly wide grin at hearing that.

"Just tell me that I do a great job."

"Not a problem, and you do, so it'll be easy to say. Now just relax, and Karl will do the honors."

It was a lot of memory to modify, and Harry was just not comfortable with it yet, that kind of thing being a bit hard to practice on your friends. Karl Aylesworth, before joining the Tecumseh staff 15 years earlier, had spent three years in Tulsa with the Obliviation Squad. In fact, his mentor had transferred to Milwaukee not long after, and had been the one to fix up Peter Weir. Karl would do the honors here, demonstrating yet again how much he disliked James Burke and Henry Hill, even to the point of 'betraying' his own school. Besides, he liked Steve and did not want to see him get into trouble.

"Steve push all thoughts of Listening Charms and Surveillance Sponges to the front of your mind."

"Yes Professor." Steve's mind was disciplined enough to pull this off, and soon Karl was doing his magic. It was a good thing that he did not need to add memory suggestions, only take things out. That was a specialty that very few of the top Obliviators, like Steven Redgrave,

had. Each government was lucky if they had as many as two on the payroll, and Karl had not been in 'practice' long enough to develop his skills to that level.

He took his time, and after 20 minutes, pronounced the job to be finished. He asked Steve a series of questions that the younger man had no clue as to the answer of, and then Obliviated the test questions as well. Steve was sent on his way after a short discussion about his Charms work, Harry and Sophie having left the room. When the coast was clear:

"Thanks a lot Karl, much appreciated."

"My pleasure Harry, anything to humble those two."

"Will you be as eager next year, when your daughter is no longer in the system?"

"I don't think this exercise will last beyond this year, so it won't matter." That caused a moment of pause for Harry, who then asked:

"Why's that?"

"Because by definition, Pathfinder is almost impossible to assault, and the other schools have noted that. Salem didn't even come close to getting into the building, much less up to Morrison's office. Now yes, that can be taken as an indictment of Salem's Defense program, and I'm sure Jacobson is ruing that he didn't send you and Drew up to the mountains, but still." Harry and Murray both, without consulting with each other, had just assumed that Jacobson would not want to give Chabon favorite Harry the most difficult assignment right off the bat.

"Is that all there is? Then they should find a neutral field where we.....sorry, they can all meet for some exercises."

"They did Harry, it's called the four school Olympics, and it's in June. You watch, after that there will be a decision on which of them to keep, and the Olympics will win."

“Interesting, very interesting. I had not thought of it like that.”

“Well I have access to more information than you do. Anyway, good luck tonight, try not to hurt anyone.”

“Conditions, conditions. People are always placing conditions on me.” They shared a sardonic smile, and after a handshake, Harry went back through the trunk, his mission accomplished.

He and Sophie got back just in time for the meeting in the Library, as final assignments were given out. The ‘fire drill’ of two weeks ago, featuring the Junior Basic Combat students had been the fiasco everyone thought it would be, a lot of disorganized youngsters running around, though no one had to go to the Med Station fortunately. Then Ripley threw another one a week later, and things were much more organized, though perversely one person was nailed in the back with a Stunner from a nervous Proctor Apprentice. No real harm done though, it did give everyone a moment of humor. None of the other schools had thought to do drills, figuring that there was no reason that a dozen Seniors and half a dozen adults should be able to take a 350 person school. Well it worked for Pathfinder anyway.

Fast forward to 1:45 am

Harry and the other Basic Combat crew were dozing fitfully in the Cortez Lounge. Dobby and Winky had both been detailed to Tecumseh, specifically in Burke’s office for Dobby and Hill’s for Winky. They were to let everyone know when the portkey trip had begun.

And here they were now, deliberately making a loud CRACK, so as to pop everyone up. And it worked too, Harry was on his feet with his wand in hand in half a second.

“Oh, it’s you guys. I was having this weird dream.....anyway, what’s going on?” Dobby had never quite gotten used to these awaking moments from Harry, even if he had just been begging for

one now, and needed a few seconds to catch his breath. Once that was accomplished:

“They just left Harry, they should be on the Outer Perimeter now.” The Great Lakes Outer Perimeter was now half a mile away, so if the Tecumseh people walked, they would have about five minutes. Speaking of walking:

“Did they have brooms with them?”

“No Harry, they planned to get here by foot.”

Liesel Matthews was so surprised she started coughing, and Jack Straw had to ask her question for her, as he whacked her on the back.

“Oh my God, are they that stupid? They’ll spend half an hour trying to avoid your Alarm Charms.”

“All the better. Reiko, you know what to do.” Reiko had Harry’s Invisibility Cloak, her own pair of omnioculars, and a new set of magical mirrors that Harry had purchased in Knockturn Alley. They only worked in pairs, and so the set that Sirius gave him was useless, as one of them was broken irreparably during the Malfoy trial battle. Still, Harry felt that it was 400 Galleons well spent. He kept one and the other was in her pocket as she grinned expectantly at him.

“I’ll be up there in a minute.” She ran out of the Lounge and up to the roof, where she somehow got into the air without disturbing any of the wards. She was the smallest of the bunch, and would present the least profile on the off chance that they were looking up. Three minutes after she left, she started with her first report. She was whispering, so as not to give off any sign that she was there. She was invisible true, but chances could not be taken, it would have been perfectly within the rules for them to knock her out of the sky.

“Okay, they’re on the other side of the Athletic Field, they’re marching in double file behind two Auror looking types I would guess. It’s not Burke and Hill, and they both look too old to be students. There are 16 of them total, two rows of eight.”

“How fast are they moving?”

“Not that fast, the Aurors are scanning, it looks like Burke and Hill are bringing up the rear. I’d say they’re 20 minutes out at this pace, give or take a minute..”

Harry looked at the others.

“All right then, you know what to do.”

Jack, Claudia, and Eric Liddell went to their respective Houses to get everyone moving. Sophie went down the Cortez dorm line and knocked on the appropriate doors. Amanda Knight was sent to warn Murray and Heyman, while Harold Abrahams went down to the basement to alert Riley Poole, who would have a special task for this evening, his first chance to use his wand in a ‘fight’ in over 15 years. That left Harry, Drew, and Liesel to look over a non-Marauder’s Map blueprint of Great Lakes and its environs. Harry had made multiple copies of Winky’s original blueprint just in case, and just in case had now arrived. Reiko kept them abreast of the Tecumseh people, who were slowly weaving around the wards. Reiko again:

“Okay, they’re now in line of sight of the school, they seem to be headed straight for the front doors.”

“Great, when they’re 50 meters out, come back in Reiko.”

“Got it Harry, you sure you don’t want me to dive bomb them?”

“You had two chances to Wronski Feint when you were playing Seeker, its too late now.”

“Such a spoilsport.”

The three Cortez Junior Basic Combat folk came back with Sophie now: Rachel, Jill Traber, and Jeff McMahon, the last of which was the top Junior student in Defense at Great Lakes, and overall as well. He had been very friendly at first to Harry, but seemed to cool off once it

appeared as though Harry was becoming friends with Rachel. That could be read in many different ways, but Harry had little time for social intrigues in Cortez, even if he was a part of them. Harry addressed them.

“Okay, you lot know what to do. Don’t let them catch you, but terrorize them as much as you can.” They all nodded, and set off. Their destination was the front entranceway, where they would be met by three others from Jefferson. Reiko:

“Okay, they’re 200 meters from school, and they’re slowing down it looks like.”

“Good, we put most of the Alarm Charms in that close.”

Sophie, Drew, and Liesel were the only ones left in the room now with Harry, and he did what he had to do.

“Liesel, I want you to go down there and supervise the Juniors, I don’t trust them quite yet and you have a good way with younger students.”

“Got it, where do you want us to herd them eventually?” She took the flattery with a smile, recognizing it to be true, not knowing why Harry really wanted rid of her. He liked her and all, she was a good WWW customer too, but he trusted no one outside of the gang and the WWW people for what was about to come out.

“Down to the basement as planned, Riley will be waiting for them.” Harry’s friendliness with the Caretaker had not gone unnoticed among the older students, and he was probably the only one who called Riley Poole by his first name when the man wasn’t there. Liesel didn’t mind though, she rather liked the idea of the Great Lakes Caretaker being part of the humiliation of Tecumseh’s best, it would add a little flavor to it.

“On my way.” She left, and Harry pulled out the Map 2.5, which he was not about to trust Liesel with the secret of, he was still procrastinating on telling Rachel and the Little Three, though he

would have told them this morning if it had been relevant to the situation.

He would use the Map 2.5 to 'manage' the battle at first, a military term that Harry had read about in a muggle history book, then he, Drew, and Sophie would join in for the coup de grace.

"All right Harry, they're 50 meters out, they've hit the marker that you set down." Along with the Alarm Charms, Harry had put down a series of phosphorescent markers all over the place, telling Reiko which one to look for at 50 meters.

"Good, come in then."

"Are you sure you don't want someone down there watching?"

"Winky and her camera will do nicely." Winky would get a lot of photographs of this night, not all of them for official school use either.

Meanwhile, outside the Great Lakes front door, Burke and Hill had come up to the front, the Alarm Charms seemingly dodged. Hill, for his part, did not like this one bit. He whispered to his mentor.

"This has been too easy Jimmy, I know Potter, he would have planned better for this." Henry Hill was one of the Tecumseh members of the School Defense Commission, which now met every other month in Boston. He and Harry had never had a one on one conversation, but he felt that he knew the lad well enough.

"He was probably shouted down as being too paranoid, you know how teenagers are, they don't like listening to someone who's been there before."

"If you say so, how are we going to work the door?"

Burke scanned the door, and found the Pink cocktail of Charms on it, not recognizing a one of them. He knew deep down that this was not a good thing, but couldn't resist finding out.

“Alohomora.”

Nothing, it wasn't going to be that easy. He tried a couple of other Unlocking Charms, and the last one worked, the door had only been locked with Compingo. The doors were only locked in the first place for the Defense exercise, and because Murray, deep down, wondered about Voldemort showing up on her doorstep. That's why six different Dark Detectors were Disillusioned and hidden within five feet of the front doors. But Burke and Hill would not set them off in any case.

The four Aurors with the Tecumseh crowd were technically under Burke's command, two of the four had served under him before, and he waved at one of them to walk through the door. The man, not liking this one bit, nevertheless obeyed orders and walked through the door. Sort of.

He was punted back about three meters, and was, of course, very pink afterward. The students all thought this was hilarious, and somehow managed some knee-slapping laughs while remaining totally silent. Burke, thuggish looking as he was, was no fool, and he had no thought that The Pink was a one time deal. He had been to Great Lakes enough to know that there was no back door, so he did the next logical thing, he motioned to Hill and they dug a ditch under the door.

With their wands of course, though them using shovels to do it would have been very amusing. The Pink Auror, name of Tim Hollenbeck, was otherwise not hurt aside from a bruise on the back of his head where it had hit the still not soft ground. So the force was still intact, and all four Aurors were very curious about what had Pink'd Hollenbeck.

The Defense teachers got the tunnel dug in less than a minute, and they slipped under the doorframe and into the school, congratulating themselves on their cleverness. They motioned for their students and Auror friends to do likewise, and soon there were 16 people in the entrance hall. They milled about quietly for a minute, as Burke, the only one who had been inside Great Lakes since the Lycan

remodeling, got his bearings. They did not wait alone however, as there were a few people waiting for them.

Great Lakes alone among the four schools had no ghosts living within its walls, there was no good reason for this really, it was just a matter of happenstance. None of the invaders knew this though, and when Jeff McMahon, under Disillusionment, approached them and uttered his words, it startled them, particularly since the muggleborn McMahon used his best 'movie ghost' voice.

"Who dares to disturb our borders. Strangers are not welcome here." Jeff was not a trained ventriloquist, though it sure would have been convenient if he had been, but he was capable of moving with cat like silence, and thus they had no way of knowing where it was coming from. They were in a foreign place, in the dark other than the tips of their wands, and waiting for a school led by the most dangerous teenager on the planet to assault them.

So they were a teeny bit freaked out at present.

Soon Rachel, Jill, and the Jefferson Juniors did the same, and then Liesel joined in.

With her Patronus.

Part of the Senior level curriculum in all Defense classes was learning how to cast the Patronus Charm, mostly for messaging purposes. Only a few managed to perfect it, and Liesel was one of them. Hers was an antelope, and it came bounding up to the Tecumseh people.

"Leave while you still can, the others are coming now. Tell my parents that I love them."

The only parents that Burke and Hill could tell that to, that would have any relevance here at Great Lakes, were Karl and Lisa Aylesworth. This was a spur of the moment genius decision on Liesel's part, and it worked like the proverbial charm.

“You hear that Henry, the Aylesworth girl is with us after all, I knew her father was bluffing me when he said he wouldn’t try to persuade her.” How this man was allowed to influence young minds was beyond the comprehension of the seven Great Lakes students under Disillusionment, they would appreciate Ripley a lot more for the rest of their time in school, that’s for sure.

“We have to do something Jimmy, we can’t just stand here and wait for them.”

“Then let’s get upstairs then, the offices are on the third floor. Stan, you and your group go with Professor Hill up the West stairwell, Jed and his team will come with me.” Stan Bailey and Jud Fletcher were the top students in their year in Defense, and were what Burke and Hill liked to think of as their versions of Harry and Drew.

Two Aurors were detailed to go with each group, and Burke led his people to the far stairwell, past the Dining Hall.

Where Jack Straw and a pair of Proctor Junior Basic Combat people awaited. Janel Huffington rolled out a package, or rather kicked it out. One of the Tecumseh kids, defying all reason given where they were, picked it up.

Not a good idea in retrospect, as it was Charmed to go off once a bare hand touched it. It was a Spell Grenade attached to a swamp, and the skin contact to the package activated the grenade, which activated the swamp. The cool thing was, the swamp was in mid-air when it activated, and soon all eight of the ‘attackers’ were drenched in muck. It reminded all of the Proctors of one of those Nickelodeon kid’s specials, and they were hard pressed to keep their guffaws to themselves.

Burke was not a trained Auror for nothing, and slogged his way into the Dining Hall, which was pitch black thanks to some Peruvian Darkness Powder that the twins had provided, and harshly bellowed out:

“Redulia!”

It was a specialized charm was meant to Illusion someone who was trying to be otherwise. It worked in a sense, but Straw's quick thinking with the Powder had hidden them very well, even if it meant that they could do little more attacking. They still tried though, and sent out a mass of Repulsars where they thought the door might be. They were far enough away that Burke only got hit with a couple of glancing blows, but he was still a bit pissed as he escaped the room. He got them back by closing the doors behind him, and using his best Sealing Charm, the same one Harry had used on the Cortez door during the Lycan invasion. It worked too, and Straw and his Junior Proctors were temporarily out of the fight, being a bit unwilling to destroy the door.

Burke ordered his people to slog through the swamp and on to the stairwell, where Harold Abrahams was waiting for them. He started whipping out minor hexes and jinxes at first, and led Burke and friends slowly up the stairwell to the second floor, where they were met by the same blue mist used at the Olympics and by Sophie during Capture the Flag. The same stuff had been used during the Tecumseh Olympics, and Burke had one of his students use the deactivation Charm:

“Finite Incantatem!”

Not so fast there youngster, as this was a souped up version of it, and could only be gotten rid of with the proper password, which Harold, and only Harold, knew about. They tried for five minutes, and nothing happened. So reluctantly, they went back down the stairs to hopefully catch up to Hill and company.

But this was not to be.

Meanwhile, Henry Hill and his people had gotten up to the second floor before being overwhelmed by the sight of all of the booby traps that Claudia and her Shawnee Juniors had laid. She had taken the twins' spell grenade and detonating wire idea a step further and disguised the tripwires as leftover Easter decorations. The first person to trip them was the unfortunate Tim Hollenbeck, and he was immediately blasted off of his feet by a hidden Percussion Hex

grenade, throwing him back down the stairs. Now he had a bloody elbow and back of his head to go along with the pink rest of him. Hill wasn't about to go up there and set off more booby traps, and he and his people were quickly cottoning on the idea that they were being set up for something here. Claudia could have used the mist too, but wanted some variety for the after action report, and she liked how Harry had described the use of the Percussion Hex grenades on the Death Eaters at Gringotts.

Burke and Hill had always known that this assault was going to be the hardest of the four, probably even harder than the Pathfinder mountains. This was because the last school to be hit would know exactly who was doing the attacking, and would have a rough idea of when. Plus they knew all about WWW and Harry's role in it, and assumed that the full arsenal of pranks sold there would be deployed in the defense. Heck, Hill's two daughters were WWW fanatics, and they wouldn't enter magical school for another four months and a year and four months respectively. That said, they both felt that a frontal assault would be something that Harry and company might not expect, they would probably expect trickery of some sort. They had heard about Great Lakes' assault on Salem, and while they admired the precision and timing of it, they did not want to emulate it themselves.

And this was the result.

They retreated down the stairs, only to find themselves in the same situation as the Burke group. Liesel had blasted through the Dining Hall doors and freed Straw and his Proctor Juniors. The two groups, now rather large, split up again and did their best to prevent Burke's and Hill's groups from getting back on the main floor. They all wanted them to be herded into the basement, and Liesel helped them along with her Patronus.

"They're coming down the stairs now, go to the basement, there's a secret way."

All the while she sent her antelope to tell them this, the Tecumseh folk were prevented from getting back on to the main floor by a mass of Repulsar fire from the rapidly tiring Juniors, who hadn't gotten a

workout this good in a long time. Burke considering doing a rush of them, wondering why there weren't any Stunners coming their way, but ultimately decided that 'Reiko' knew what she was doing, and led his people down to the basement. Hill did the same, and they both got through the basement doors with no more ill effect. Except for one, tiny little thing:

They did not check the basement doors for Alarm Charms, and a very, very loud klaxon was set off as they did so, in Harry's voice.

"WARNING!!! WARNING!! THE SCHOOL HAS BEEN BREACHED! I REPEAT, THE SCHOOL HAS BEEN BREACHED! FOLLOW YOUR DEFENSE PLAN WITH ALL DUE HASTE!"

If this had been a real emergency, of course it would have been Murray on the horn, and this was the same warning given during the two fire drills. The Tecumseh people didn't know this though, and they quickly had visions of a couple hundred pissed off from lack of sleep students coming at them with drawn wands.

There was no secret passage in the basement, at least not to the top floors. The Great Lakes basement was just 14 months old, and while Riley Poole loved the idea of a Hogwarts style building with all its attendant mysteries, he knew that he was on the wrong side of the pond for that. The basement, both levels, was just a basement, and all of the rooms had been conveniently left unlocked.

Conveniently for the defenders anyway, as Tecumseh would soon find out.

Burke and Hill met up in the gymnasium on the upper basement level, and quickly came to an agreement that they had: A: been suckered, and B: that they had nicely maneuvered down there with no escape. All the schools were warded against portkeys and Apparition as a matter of course, and the wards were powerful enough that it would take the two teachers and four Aurors a long way to get around them. They talked about going up through the floor, but the Aurors, who were not supposed to be decision makers here, protested that this was too reminiscent of the Lycan attack.

While they were debating on what to do, Harry and company sent the rest of the Junior and Senior classes, non-Basic Combat members down to relieve their tired classmates, who were to stay in the now door-less Dining Hall to rest up, just in case they were needed. Reiko, now back from her outside intelligence gathering, was in charge, and she quickly sent two teams of six to the basement doors to hem them in. There was one other way to the bottom level of the basement, a trap door with a red X on it. The door was only meant for use in emergencies, and led to Riley's workshop, the living quarters for the house elves, and some storage. This red X was like a magnet for any intruders, especially the curious type, and Hill and Burke were equal to the task. They poked their heads through the trap door, did not get Pink'd as a result, and led their people down to the bottom level. They had put up Silencing Barriers before doing so, in the hopes that the stairwell monitors that they knew had to be there, would not notice.

They didn't notice, in no small part due to the Silencing Barriers just described, but Harry, Sophie and Drew were watching the Map 2.5, and knew that the game was just where they wanted it to be. Harry rolled up the Map and put it away, it wouldn't be needed any longer. The three of them left, and made a quick stop on the faculty floor to collect Ripley, Greenleaf, Heyman, and Murray. The latter two were the ones that the invaders had to capture, and they liked the idea of doing a little taunting:

"Here we are, so close but yet so far." Not that they said this out loud or anything.

Murray had worked a few cases with Burke in their Auror days, and was more than willing to do this, usually taunting was not her thing. They got down to the basement level, where Reiko filled them in. The teams of six were still guarding the doors, and were then sent to investigate, even though Harry already knew where the Tecumseh people were. They reported back that the trapdoor had been used, and that the invaders were down on the last level. They knew this because the trapdoor had been sprayed with a solvent cooked up by Riley Poole that would leave magnified fingerprints on from anyone who touched it. It would also stain the perpetrators hands blue, and he had been begging Murray to let him use it on the Great Lakes students, but so far she was resisting. She had readily agreed to its

testing use here though, and it appeared to have worked with flying colors.

The house elves downstairs, or at any of the other schools, were considered to be strictly off limits, and their door was sealed shut from the inside. That left the storage rooms and Poole's workshop for the still without a plan Tecumseh people. The four Aurors, led by nine year veteran Rade Butcher, were getting more and more frustrated with Burke and Hill as the minutes progressed, and were getting closer and closer to saying something about it too. Then Harry interrupted.

"Students and faculty of Tecumseh, and friends. You have one minute to surrender or we will come in after you. You have lost this round, no need to lose it badly. Your clock starts now."

James Burke, while he would later admit to admiring Harry's ultimatum, nevertheless had a negative reply, via Sonorus.

"Come and get us Potter!"

Harry turned to Murray.

"I was really hoping that he would say that. Drew, shall we?"

"After you."

Harry and Drew walked up to the stairway, and silently padded their way down. The door down there was open, by prearrangement, and the Tecumseh people, thinking themselves safe, had not bothered to booby trap it. Harry and Drew then Disillusioned themselves and walked slowly down the hall, until they got to the storage room door, where the invaders were holed up.

Inside, Drew was laughing his usually calm ass off that they at least had not posted a sentry, but he could suppose that they did not want to lose anyone prematurely. He proceeded to launch his Patronus, an eagle, and it 'flew' toward Riley Poole's workshop. His door was

closed and locked, but the Patronus just floated through, and delivered the message:

“One more minute, then do your thing.”

Poole was nowhere near being powerful enough to do a Patronus in reply, so he just busied himself with getting ready. Poole was 32 years old, but due to clean living and rarely ever going outdoors, he could pass for 18 if the light wasn't too good. He gathered his props, gripped his wand tight, and walked out of his workshop and toward the storage room door. He was actually pretty excited about all of this, and again thanked his chosen deity that Harry had wandered into his workshop 19 months ago.

Meanwhile, inside the storage room:

Hill and Burke had chosen to make a final stand here. They abandoned the idea of blasting up through the ceiling, figuring that the defenders would anticipate this and be ready for it. Instead, their idea was to waste time, and at least make Great Lakes work to take them. Great Lakes had taken Salem in just over 30 minutes, with Pathfinder needing 45, due to tunneling complications, to take Tecumseh. Salem had spent a pair of useless hours in failing to take Pathfinder, and that's what Burke and Hill were aiming for now. They wanted to make the storage room so impregnable and dangerous that Great Lakes would have to come up with an elaborate plan that would burn time, and at least they could say that they did not finish 'last'.

And Burke and Hill, who were not consulting the Aurors on much of anything tonight, felt that a chaotic takedown might allow one of them to slip out unnoticed and get up to the faculty offices.

So they laid down as many traps and wards as they could in the five minutes or so that they had to actually accomplish what they planned. They had a couple of WWW swamps themselves, Burke rather liked Steve Atwood and his creative and dogged sales schemes, and one was already deployed near the door. Not right in front of the door, but covering the left part of it, a bit over halfway. This would have the planned effect of herding an attacker or attackers to one direction,

where more direct fire could hit them. They were counting on the Great Lakes people not to want to destroy their own school, and for their to be a frontal assault.

Well there was about to be a frontal assault all right.

Poole got to the door, and breathed a heavy sigh. Harry appeared out of nowhere, startling Poole even though he knew it was coming. The younger man whispered.

“Stand back and I’ll blow the door, be ready.”

“I’m ready dude, do it.” Even quieter, and a still Disillusioned Drew barely heard it. Harry slipped on his Invisibility Cloak, which still fit him nicely after all of these years, and adjusted it so that just his wand was sticking out. He waved his wand up and down as if on a counter.

One

Two

Three

Abrumpere

“WHAM!!!”

Harry had done the spell soundlessly, just in case, and had pushed all of his power into the spell as the door exploded into bits of wooden shrapnel that would have done some serious damage if anyone had been in its flight path and not put up a quick shield. Poole waited about a second for the wood to get out of the way, and then threw in a bag of spell grenade. He had been practicing the throw, and the very flimsy bag he had been using came apart very easily, allowing for a nice spread. They were loaded with various minor jinxes and hexes, nothing too major, and about half the Tecumseh students got hit with something.

That wasn't the point though, and when Poole began firing like crazy from around the corner, it only added to the confusion. Poole had continued on with Defense through his final year, but this was the first time he had used his wand directly against another person since, and he was having a ball. All that magical energy stored up for 15 years led to a pretty rapid fire rate, and the hidden Harry and Drew would later blame the other for not taking him along to Salem back in October.

Hill finally took charge inside, being out of the damage path of Riley and of the door.

“It's just one guy! Pearson, Appleton, get 'em!”

Tara Pearson and Danny Appleton both thought that this was a terrible idea, but nonetheless obeyed orders and sprinted toward Riley, who immediately fled back to the safety and relative comfort of his workshop. The chaos gave Harry and Drew a chance to slip into the storage room. The lights were now out, some of Riley's spells had 'accidentally' knocked them out, and light was only given now by wands. Harry knew Hill's voice, and the Ventriloquist Sponges had provided Burke's, and fortunately the two were standing together. The two students walked as quietly as they could toward them, and managed to get right next to them, as the Defense teachers mulled out loud about what to do next.

Appleton and Pearson almost managed to catch Poole, who got off a lucky Petrificus Totalus as he shut his workshop door. The door locked magically upon closing, to prevent any student snoopers, and Poole was not foolish enough to liaise romantically or otherwise with a student. Pearson and Appleton, after the former unfroze the latter, let loose with a barrage of Reducto on the door, but they couldn't get through. Unfortunately they had neglected to check their six, and Reiko and Sophie had snuck in, along with Rachel Kessler and Jeff McMahon. The Seniors shouted:

“Accio Wands!”

The Juniors then went with:

“Accio students!”

The Tecumseh two didn't have a chance, and flew right into the not so loving embrace of the defenders. They were a bit chagrined at being the first captured, but were treated kindly and sent to the rear. Now there were 14 people in the storage room, not counting Harry and Drew. Next up was our man Ray Elwood, who came with the non-Basic Combat Proctors. He would lead the next assault, as they crept up to the now repaired door, done unasked by the Aurors.

Ray's force, of 15 including him, did away with subtlety and blasted the doors and surrounding wall apart, relishing the chance to do a little repairable damage to their school. They rained Repulsar fire down on anything that looked like it might move, and several of the Tecumseh raiders took some shots to the chops as a result. Ray alone didn't fire, he just threw small bundles out of a pack on his hip. The offensive lasted just 30 seconds, as Burke and Hill wisely did not order a pursuit. Two of the Proctors had gotten Stunned, but were quickly pulled from sight before they could be dragged into the room. Ray and company retreated, and as soon as he and his people were safe, Ray put Sonorus next to a Ventriloquist Sponge and activated it.

“Do you give up yet? We can do this all night you know.” It was Harry's voice, and the Ventriloquist Sponge gave audio of such quality that the Tecumseh contingent did not realize that Harry wasn't really available to talk right now.

There was silence from the storage room, as the Aurors had finally had enough and walked over to Burke and Hill. Hollenbeck was their spokesman, as a couple of the students again repaired the damage to the door and its surrounding foundation.

“Are we really just going to stand here and let them come at us? In case you guys didn't realize, there are 300 something of them, they can just come in waves.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Besides that we wouldn’t be trapped down here if you had solicited our input?”

“You aren’t here to think, you’re here to help the students.” None of which could hear this, unless you counted Drew and Harry. A couple of the students had started small fires in conjured up jars, a Hermione specialty. A couple of them were slowly walking around, looking for the packages that our man Ray had thrown in. The Defense teachers had not noticed them in the cacophony.

“I’ve already taken some licks myself, and we won’t take any others. Either we go up through the ceiling or we do a tunneling of some sort so that we can do an end around. Take your pick, but those are our options. No more frontal attacks.”

“We aren’t under your orders, you four are under mine.”

“I’m sure Albert will see things our way.” Albert Running Deer was the Head Auror in Tulsa, and Hollenbeck’s immediate boss.

Burke and Hill looked at each other for a moment, and seemed to agree that they would lose this argument if it really came to it, and Hill said:

“Fine, we go up through the ceiling. Get the students together, we’d better do this quickly before they throw another raid at us.” The students gathered round, and they were about to levitate the lightest one up to the ceiling to cut through when it happened.

Ray’s packages went off.

They were Peruvian Darkness Powder mated with Percussion Spell grenades, and Ray had spread them just perfectly. The entire room was enveloped in darkness, and Harry and Drew struck immediately.

“Stupefy!”

Multiplied by ten apiece, as they had practiced this ahead of time and had specific fields of fire. So amazingly they hit eight people and none of them were themselves.

This corresponded with Sophie and Rachel outside, who again blasted down the door and led their Cortez people inside. They shrugged off the swamp and started Summoning Tecumseh students willy nilly out the door. The Peruvian Powder was designed to last for five minutes, and the Cortez people retreated after just over a minute, having captured all the students. This technically did not end the exercise, as the Aurors and Burke and Hill were still conscious, the Summoning had specifically excluded them.

There was a good reason for this, as the Aurors didn't even bother to fix the doors before beginning to blast a hole in the ceiling. Kenji Yakamura was the lightest Auror, and he was levitated up to the floor above, which happened to be the Controversy Conference Room. He quickly got the other three up there and they made to leave the room.

Well they left the room all right, directly into the waiting wands of Amanda Knight, heretofore uninvolved in the morning's events, and a hodgepodge of Transition students, most of whom would make up their Basic Combat class the next year. Knight, whose father was an Auror Pod leader under Drew's father, did not ask for surrender, and merely opened fire, the cue for her people to do the same. Fifteen Stunners let fly, over half hitting their targets, and all four of the Aurors went down like so many bowling pins.

And this just left Burke and Hill, alone in the storage room, with the pitch black due to last another two minutes. They had heard the racket up top, Knight and company had gone a little rock and roll, screaming their spells. Hill spoke first.

"Well I suppose that just leaves the tunneling."

"This is not going to look good, us being the last ones not captured."

"They had all the advantages Jimmy, there's no shame here."

This talking was just what Harry and Drew needed to redirect their bearings and get next to their new victims. They had agreed that Harry would take Burke and Drew would take Hill, and they had to move fast or their advantage would be lost. Harry sidled up to Burke and waited for Drew to tap his foot on the floor. He did so, and before Burke could ask what that noise was, Harry yelled.

“BOO!”

“Stupefy!”

That was Drew, who had his wand pointed right at Hill's side, and the younger Tecumseh teacher went down for the count.

Burke tried to fire some indiscriminate spells, but Harry and Drew immediately hit the deck, while at the same time having no idea where the door was, and hoping that Burke wouldn't make a run for it. He didn't, and quickly enough the Peruvian Powder evaporated into thin air, and once Burke's eyes adjusted to the light, he found himself staring at the wands of Harry and Drew.

“Hello there, I'm Harry Potter.”

“And I'm Drew Baylor, I believe that you have a wand to hand to us?”

Burke just started laughing, and proffered it in between them, and Drew took it.

“You guys were good, you guys were very good.”

“Thanks Professor, if you'll come with us.”

Harry then put his wand to his throat.

“Attention students and faculty, the exercise is now over. The Tecumseh contingent has been captured and the exercise is officially concluded. Thank you.” While he said this, Drew was waking up Hill,

who had to fix his broken nose, as he had fallen face first. He looked a bit pissed, and asked the first question to pop into his mind.

“How the hell did you guys know where we were so fast, we avoided all of your Alarm Charms.”

Drew took a small device out of his pocket, and tossed it to Hill.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a muggle contraption called a Trembler. They detect motion and give off an electronic signal, you guys didn’t scan for muggle things, or so I’m assuming, and you set off about half a dozen of them in your first quarter mile. That’s how we were able to activate our plan so quickly.” Drew rarely lied in his everyday life, and Harry was very impressed by how smoothly he was doing it here. There were tremblers out there on the Tecumseh path, but they had only been placed there afterward, by Dobby. They had gotten them through a connection of Professor Ziegler’s that he wouldn’t tell them the particulars of, but they were strictly used as decoys.

“I can’t wait to hear your full plan.” Burke was all smiles now that it was over, he had such sway over his Headmaster that even losing both ends of the four school exercise wouldn’t harm him in the slightest. He knew that Lisa Aylesworth, widely believed within the faculty to be the next Deputy, didn’t like him, but he was totally unconcerned.

They walked up the stairs to the Dining Hall, where everyone was waiting for them. Burke shook Murray’s hand heartily, getting his wand back immediately afterward.

The Tecumseh people were told a somewhat edited version of the plan, leaving out the house elves, Steve Atwood, any intelligence gathering at Tecumseh, and the Map 2.5. Okay, that was more than somewhat. It helped that only the gang knew about the Map, and only the Basic Combat people and the faculty knew about Steve Atwood and his activities. In fact that was Burke’s first question.

“So how much did Atwood help you out? We know he’s your boy there.”

“He didn’t, I wouldn’t put him in that position, nor our person at Pathfinder if they had been chosen to attack us. It never even came up to be honest with you.” Always be wary of someone saying ‘to be honest with you’, and no one in the room knew that better than James Burke.

“That’s very big of you, I appreciate that.” He was already composing the soon to be Steve Atwood interrogation in his mind.

The four Aurors, surprisingly, decided to keep quiet about their differences of opinion with Burke and Hill, and just contented themselves with being impressed with the Great Lakes plan, and how all encompassing it had been. It utilized no faculty, just under 70 students, and the school’s Caretaker, who was getting quite a few congratulations from a very impressed staff. Harry and Drew took their bows too, as they had masterminded two very impressive routs during this academic year. Jacobson would later get a lot of flack, most of it good natured, for not putting the two Great Lakes geniuses against Pathfinder and their mountains.

The after action lasted another half hour, and then the Tecumseh people flooded back to school using the fireplaces in Murray’s and Heyman’s offices. Burke had Atwood in his first class that morning, and Steve willingly took the drink offered to him after class. He passed his test with flying colors, Dobby having removed any and all evidence of Harry’s shenanigans. Burke would always wonder if he had just asked the wrong questions, he had a hard time believing the Trembler ploy, or that the Great Lakes people could muster that large a force on just a few minutes notice.

Back at Great Lakes Murray heartily congratulated all of her students, saying that they had done the school proud. She kept back the Senior Basic Combat students and the Defense teachers.

“I have to say, as a former Auror, that that was one of the most impressive routs I’ve ever seen. You didn’t lose a person, and

managed to make a statement at the same time. I'll confess to you that I have never had good opinions of James Burke and Henry Hill, and the bunch of you, and the other Juniors and Seniors, proved why. Professor Greenleaf and Professor Ripley, along with certain tutors back in Blighty, have done wonderful work on you, but they couldn't have done so without the raw material in the first place. Thank you." She proceeded to shake everyone's hand, and surprised a lingering Riley Poole by doing the same to him.

"Harry, I don't know what made you think to give Riley a part to play here, but it was inspired. Riley, you did a wonderful job."

"Thank you Professor Murray, I was glad to help my school." The others had never seen Poole looking so happy, and the story of him battering down the storage room door and attacking 16 people that all should have wiped the floor with him would be told for years to come. His popularity among the students would skyrocket afterward as well, he became the anti-Filch.

As they were all leaving for a few hours of well earned rest, Harry pulled Riley aside.

"You know that your retainer will continue past me, right? As long as WWW is sold in this school, and you're still willing, you'll always be part of our business. And not just for this morning, but for the big help you've been since I came here."

"Thanks for that, and for including me here, I had a total blast."

"You blasted all right, the looks on their faces when they found out it was our Caretaker raining down on them." Hill had turned green, while Burke's genial smile got a little less genial.

"Hey, I got A's on my OWL and NEWT in Defense." Not a squib was he.

"It worked great, and in the unlikely event that this repeats next year, I'll make sure that Rachel and Jeff have a big part for you to play."

That was easy to promise, since he wouldn't have to deliver. After the four school Olympics the next month, it was decided that the school assaults, while an interesting idea to do every once in awhile, were not to become an every year event. Even Murray agreed that it took a lot of time away from studying for other subjects, and did not object to the cancellation/rescheduling. It would be held again in 2000-01, and every three or four years after that.

James Burke and Henry Hill did get a lot of grief about their performances during the attacking and defending phases, but ultimately it was Tecumseh's low OWL and NEWT scores that put them on probation for the next academic year. The Tim Hollenbeck and Rade Butcher led Aurors had left no doubt in the minds of their superiors that a lot of shoddy teaching was going on in their alma mater, and the two longtime friends would be under a lot of pressure in the next year or so to reform.

Monday, April 20, 1998

Ministry of Magic, Courtroom Orion

9:00 am GMT

"So is it your testimony then Harry, that you did not fire any Dark Curses, or anything that could have killed anyone?"

"Yes Mr. Biller, that is correct."

Harry had been the first witness called in the Stephen Dale matter, and Travis put him through his paces, still getting used to his new position as DMLE Head. He had told the story of the lunch and aftermath, nothing that The Wizengamot could not have gotten from a back issue of The Daily Prophet, but it still rang louder coming from Harry.

"So you in no way wanted to kill anyone there?"

"Not until the defendant fired Avada Kedavra at me, then it was you and The Minister who restrained me, as you were totally correct to do

so. If I had wanted Dumbledore, Moody, or any of their henchmen dead, I could have done it very easily. I did not." The Wizengamot ate this up, and one could tell that from their faces. They had heard about, read about, and listened on the wireless about enough of Harry's battles to know that while he did not kill indiscriminately.....well to kill 'discriminately', one still has to kill.

"Thank you Harry. I tender the witness."

Dale's representative was Stephen Saunders, a man in his early 40's with a good reputation. He was the usual choice of the pure blood brigade, but this time was somewhat reluctant to badger Harry, much to everyone's surprise. He did get a few pokes in though, even if he was friendly sounding all the while.

"Mr. Potter, or may I call you Harry, as Mr. Biller seems comfortable with?"

"Mr. Biller is a personal friend, he may call me whatever he wishes. That said, I don't care either way." Unwittingly, Harry opened the door for Saunders' line of questioning, though few questions would be asked.

"Excellent. Harry, did Mr. Dale seem contrite afterward? After he loosed the curse and missed, is what I'm talking about."

"He threw himself on my mercy and that of Minister Scrimgeour."

"Another personal friend of yours, if I'm not mistaken." He was staring right at Rufus when he said that.

"I have that honor, yes." Rufus smiled at hearing that.

"So it's safe to assume that he is prosecuting this case to placate you."

"No it is not, he and I have not talked about your client since a few minutes after the incident occurred." Though it was a bit prejudicial, Rufus could be seen nodding in agreement from his spot in the room.

“But he must know your feelings on the matter.”

“One can assume so, yes. They have not changed since that day.”

“And the Head of the Wizengamot that will pass judgment on my client, he is another personal friend is he not?”

“He is family, yes.” He stole a look at Arthur, who smiled with a paternal pride.

“You are very well connected aren’t you Harry?”

“Your point being?”

Saunders turned to the ‘jury’.

“My point is, my client is being railroaded by a Ministry bent on appeasing The Boy Who Lived. Did Stephen Dale do something stupid? Yes, he most certainly did. He was a young man, manipulated by Albus Dumbledore, who hardly trained him for any kind of battle or police action, and he panicked in the face of curses being thrown at him by three of the finest magical fighters in our country: Harry Potter, Fred Weasley, and George Weasley. Was Stephen wrong to think his life was in danger, being unwillingly joined in battle against foes younger than he who have extensive killing resumes?” Biller had had enough, and objected, the speech had barely taken 30 seconds.

“Objection sustained. Mr. Saunders, do you have any further questions for Harry?”

“Yes Minister, just one last question. Harry, did you not say that my client was, and I quote, ‘a dead man’?”

“Yes I did, anyone pointing a wand at me and throwing out Unforgivables would get the same threat.” Harry would have thought that was obvious to anyone with half a brain, but Travis had asked

him as nicely as possible not to be snide with Saunders, and Harry had been on his best behavior.

“I have no further questions for the witness, but as this time I ask that you dismiss the charges.” He chose not to bring up Harry’s throwing of Dale into the bar, though Dale looked a bit peeved that he did not. Rufus wasn’t about to dismiss anything.

“Denied. Mr. Biller, your next witness.”

Travis then called, in succession, five members of the Dumbledore crew who were there that day. They testified that Harry had not seemed bloodthirsty until after the attempt on his life, and that none of the six: Harry, the twins, Ginny, Draco, and Remus, seemed intent on causing permanent harm. Fred and George were the last, and they supported this account. They took just an hour for the seven of them, and Saunders wasn’t able to refute any of it as Biller rested.

Saunders called numerous character witnesses, painting a picture of Dale as a fine young man with a good future, who had been mixed up in Dumbledore’s schemes. He did not call Dale to the stand, and rested with his brief summation. He ended with this:

“Stephen Dale is as much a victim as Harry Potter of Albus Dumbledore’s plots and ploys. You would think that Harry Potter would understand this, and show forgiveness. But no, he has become bent on revenge. You watch, members of The Wizengamot, he will get his revenge sooner or later. My client is guilty of nothing more than a mistake made in the heat of battle, a battle he never should have been involved in. He has already served three and a half months in prison, let that be the end of it.” He knew that he didn’t have a prayer unless Biller suddenly showed leniency, which was not in his character. He stood up.

“Stephen Dale was at The Leaky Cauldron willingly. He was not on duty at The Ministry at the time, and was under no lawful order to do anything. He chose to participate in the fracas of his own free will. He chose to fire Avada Kedavra at Harry Potter of his own free will. His choice, ladies and gentlemen of The Wizengamot. Using an

Unforgivable Curse is against the law if done so willingly. He was willing. He was the only one of two dozen people in the fracas to use an Unforgivable. A little less than a year before this took place, Minister Scrimgeour and I granted Harry Potter, Fred Weasley, and George Weasley Avada Kedavra privileges equal to that of any Auror. They chose not to use them on this day. As Mr. Saunders said, they are younger than the defendant, but somehow they showed more mature judgment. The Ministry and the DMLE ask that you convict Stephen Dale and sentence him to the required 10 year term in prison, minus time served. Thank you.”

Nope, no leniency.

The granting of Avada Kedavra privileges to the WWW three had not been let out before now, and even Arthur looked astonished. Travis felt that he had done pretty well, given his limited experience in such matters. Saunders was usually a formidable foe, but he had had no real case to speak.

Since this was not a capital crime, and the defendant was not a ‘name’ person, the full Wizengamot was not sitting, rather it was 15 of them, and Rufus was only there because it involved Harry. Dale’s grandfather had been recused in this case, and Arthur was there more by luck of the draw than anything, since he and Harry were not technically family members, at least by blood. He led them out, and were spared the sight of Harry, Fred, and George huddled together, plotting about what they would do if Dale was let loose. Biller watched them, and in front of the gallery did not dare go over and say anything, about anything. So he just bided his time, talking with Rob and Edgar. Sarah Westbrook’s term as DADA teacher at Hogwarts was about to end, and she was waffling on whether or not to continue. If she didn’t, things would go back to the way they were before: Her leading a crew of Rob and Edgar. If she stuck around, that would cause some shifting, and the three of them were soon animatedly talking about future plans.

Or they were for about 15 minutes, and then Arthur and the rest of the members of the jury returned.

“Do you have a verdict Mr. Weasley?”

“Yes Minister. Stephen Dale, you have presented no compelling reason to judge you not guilty, and your refusal to take the stand in your own defense did not help. We therefore find the defendant guilty as charged, and sentence him to nine years in prison, starting from this day.” This was just a few months less than Travis had asked for, and Dale was thunderstruck as he took in the verdict.

“Thank you Mr. Weasley. The court is now adjourned.” There was no gavel to bang, and everyone left in an orderly fashion for the most part. Dale was one of the last, and he and Harry just stared at each other, before Harry walked up to him.

“That verdict just saved your life, I hope you’re not too thick to realize that.”

“This was not my fault!” Now he had his sand back, a bit too late perhaps, as Harry just laughed dryly.

“You loosed the curse, so yes, it was. If they had found you not guilty I would have killed you right here in the courtroom. No one fires a Killing Curse at me and gets away with it, no one. Count your blessings, and keep your nose clean once you get out, and you and I will never have to have another conversation again, be it with words or wands.”

“Go to hell Potter.” The twins heard this and just laughed at him, doing a little pointing as well to add the extra humiliating effect. Harry just shook his head.

“I’m sure nine years in jail will remove that silly pride of yours. Goodbye.” With that, Harry successfully resisted temptation to separate Dale’s head from his body, and walked out with the twins. He had to start on his portkey ride right away if he was going to make breakfast at Great Lakes. Travis, after seeing that Dale was led back to his cell, walked to Sanford Jenkins’ office and plopped down in a chair.

“So what were they planning?”

“Nothing too extravagant, they were going to challenge him to a duel and then immediately execute sentence.” Jenkins was grinning as he said it, he dealt with the twins a lot as part of the Edward Grant/Alan Brandon operation, and quite liked them.

“You heard everything?”

“There was a lot of ambient noise at times, but the Listening Charms under their seats worked perfectly.” They had made sure that the WWW three sat up front.

“Did they know about it?”

“Probably, didn’t you tell me once that Harry does a scan everywhere he goes? We didn’t hear the scan, but Potter should be able to do Silent Magic by now.”

“We have Peter Tyson to thank for the scanning part, but on the whole I’m glad that he’s so careful. Anyhow, thanks Sanford.” He made for the door, and was stopped as his hand was on the knob.

“If they had tried it their way, would you have stopped them?”

“Right there I would have, yes. But then Dale would have later on been killed while trying to escape, poor fellow. I fear though, for the quality of food he’ll be getting for the next nine years. Probably going to be a lot of noise in his area of the cell block too, especially late at night.” Since their dual promotions, Biller and Jenkins had become better friends, now that their professional rivalry, however friendly it had been, was now finished. So Travis thought nothing of sharing his plans with his subordinate.

“You’d let Harry get away with anything wouldn’t you?”

“For the most part, as long as Voldemort is alive and kicking.”

“A bad guy who’s losing very badly, he’s not as much a threat as we thought. Not nearly as much as last time.”

“One day soon he’s going to see the ‘dark’, and go after our muggle friends. Then we’ll have problems. Until then, we should be happy that he’s getting such bad advice.” He walked out the door, leaving a thoughtful Jenkins in his wake.

Indeed that very night another factory in Little Whinging blew apart, this time killing 30 people on the night shift at a candy processing plant, and injuring a like number. It was less than a quarter of the death toll of the Grunnings incident, but still hit the town hard, it had not stopped reeling since Vernon’s factory exploded.. The constabulary in Little Whinging got as little hard evidence there as they did at Grunnings, and the city was again full of funerals, and likewise full of unanswered questions.

Over the next weeks, explosions and mishaps continued in three, very interestingly located, cities: Little Whinging and Attleton in England, and Highland Harbour in Scotland. They were interesting in that they were the childhood residences of Harry Potter, Rufus Scrimgeour, and Travis Biller, respectively. This was not lost on any of the three men, they all knew multiple people killed in the ‘accidents’, and it was a signal that perhaps Voldemort’s days of frontal assaults were finished. Scotland Yard could not make any sense of the patterns, as Scrimgeour and Biller were officially off the books as far as records went, and Harry was now officially dead for muggle purposes. So no trail would lead back to them, at least muggle-wise.

But those magicals who followed the muggle news, couldn’t help but start wondering. The only benefit of the carnage was that it put to bed once and for all any idea that either The Minister or his right hand man were remotely allied with Voldemort. The Daily Prophet ran no stories about the explosions, though McCrae too had noted the connections, and he was monitoring things. He was still sure that Rufus and Harry would carry the day, and that the war would be over by summer, with an exclusive interview with Harry after the final deed was done. That was the plan anyway.

That Saturday, the Great Lakes Seniors had their final Flackter Alley trip, one of the last stops on their nostalgia tour. Oh they could visit Flackter as much as they wanted after graduation, but it wasn't really the same. Bill and Charlie had told Harry the same thing about Hogsmeade, the thrill was in the rarity of it all. So the gang mostly spent their time in Flackter, rather than leaving for the wonders of muggle Milwaukee. Aside from Reiko and Warrick that is, who head faked them all by Apparating to Indianapolis for their jewelry shopping. They were there and back in an hour, and refused to say what, if anything they had bought. Warrick had ultimately taken Harry up on his loan offer, and carried with him a series of traveler's checks that his roommate had gotten through the bank. He returned some of them afterward, and would only point to Graduation Day on the calendar as a hint to when things might go down. Everyone treated it as a done deal though, and gave much congratulations.

Saturday, May 2, 1998

9:30 am

Cortez Lounge

The last of the spectators to be had just left the Lounge, and Warrick looked at his assembled team.

"Now remember, don't take these guys lightly, not a one of them. This is a veteran team that they have now, they've had four games together as one unit, whereas we're more of a hodgepodge of experience. We have the best player in the air, my roommate, and we have the most experienced player in the game, yours truly. Remember that, and we'll be fine. Jane, you might actually get a workout today, I hope you're up for it."

"Oh Captain my Captain, I'll surely try." For someone who just turned 14, Jane had an interesting sense of humor. Warrick could appreciate that, and thus allowed next year's Captain to lead them out of school and up to the field. They could have flown, as the Proctor players did, but Warrick liked the warm-up feel of a good

quarter mile walk. On the way there, the three Seniors did their best to try to rev up the younger four.

Once there, they did their laps around the stadium as Dick Greenleaf, who had won/lost the announcer's draw, introduced the teams.

“And first, your reigning Quidditch Cup Champions from Cortez House!”

“At Keeper, a Sophomore from Whitewater, Wisconsin, Jane Abbott!”

“At Captain and Beater, a Senior from Indianapolis, Indiana, Warrick Forrester!” Game number 20 for Warrick, only Harry in this game was even close at 12, though they had been playing for the same number of years. Reiko was next in line with eight games over three seasons.

“At Beater, a Novice from Bloomington, Indiana, Marty Coyle!”

“At Chaser, a Senior from Alice Springs, Oklahoma, Reiko Aylesworth!”

“At Chaser, a Freshman from Georgetown, Michigan, Billy Amend!”

“At Chaser, a Sophomore from Oakdale, Illinois, Kim Cuthbert!”

“And at Seeker, a Senior from Godric's Hollow, Wales, Harry Potter!”

Much applause and cheering from the crowd, as the twins and Bill were the guest Brits along for the match, with Fleur along as well. Next up was Proctor, all of them playing in their fifth games, none having departed for the Quodpot team.

“At Keeper, a Sophomore from Grand Rapids, Michigan, Neal Stephenson!”

“At Chaser, an Apprentice from Cuyahoga City, Ohio, Danny Waterhouse!”

“At Chaser, a Freshman from Paducah, Kentucky, Elizabeth Zeur!”

“At Chaser, a Senior from Milan, Tennessee, Ike Newton!”

“At Beater, a Sophomore from Holt, Michigan, Bobby Shaftoe!”

“At Beater, a Junior from Holt, Michigan, Jack Shaftoe!” The Shaftoe brothers were stereotypical in that they hated each others guts everywhere but on the Quidditch Pitch. The rest of the time they could barely stand the sight of each other, and Bobby had nearly quit school when he had drawn Proctor as a Novice. When told this a year ago, Fred and George decided that they liked them, it reminded them of themselves and Percy, though there was no Quidditch tension there. The big difference was that the Shaftoes weren't very good Quidditch players, and were always the only ones at tryouts willing and able to play Beater.

“And at Captain and Seeker, a Senior from Charleston, West Virginia, Ray Elwood!” Our man Ray was a popular fellow, and got the most cheers on his team.

The guest referee today was our old friend Shawn Respert, who had referred the Wetzell punch a little less than a year ago. He gave Warrick and Ray the usual spiel, and then the balls were put in the air.

“The Quaffle is taken by Aylesworth, she passes to Amend who lets go a long shot.....scores! Cortez is up 10-0 right off the bat.” Not the Beater bat, though Marty had already connected with a Bludger and sent it just to the side of Ray's ear. This was Warrick's strategy: Target our man Ray. He felt that Jane in goal needed to face some shots this time, with Sally Jenkins coming up in five weeks. Also, with Ray not having missed a Snitch in the last three games, or more accurately, since he had last faced The Boy Who Lived, it was decided that Warrick and Marty would attempt to forcibly remove our man Ray from the game.

They gave it their best shot, and while Ray never had to leave the game, he was never quite able to actually, you know, LOOK for the Snitch, being busy dodging for his life. The Proctor defense, aside from the Shaftoe brothers, was pretty stout, and Reiko had a somewhat difficult time scoring on Proctor Keeper Neal Stephenson, by the 30 minute mark it was only 90-0 for Cortez. The Proctor Chasers were not that great at shooting, only at defending, and Billy Amend and Kim Cuthbert weren't much better. So it was another snoozer of a game for Jane Abbott in the Cortez goals, though she did have to face four shots in that first half hour. Harry had all the time in the world to look for the Snitch, not that it appeared more than twice during the first 20 minutes.

The second half of the hour-long game was livened up when Marty took out Chaser Ike Newton with a Bludger shot that was so close and well hit that it broke Newton's broom in half. Newton took after his namesake and demonstrated gravity quite nicely as he plummeted to the ground, only not being planted due to an alert Respert. Some splinters from the broom penetrated Newton's legs, and he was done for the game. Warrick wanted to yell at Marty for giving Ray a moment to rest, but couldn't deny that it worked brilliantly. Most Quidditch teams had terrible reserves, given that Quodpot took so many of the best flyers, and Proctor was no different. In fact it was worse for them, as everyone thinking of trying out knew that there were no starting spots open. So their one reserve Chaser, Novice Lou Capet, took the air with a sense of imminent doom.

Ray was now fleeing for his life again, and at the 59 minute mark, Harry spotted his prize near the Proctor goal. He charged after it, nearly ramming into a Chaser from each side and the Proctor Keeper. The Snitch wasn't totally amenable to the capture though, and sped off straight up, with Harry quickly on its heels.....err, wings. Harry was almost 1,000 feet up in the air by the time he finally got it, the ninth time he had captured the Golden Snitch, with only a Dementor tainted loss four and a half years ago spoiling his perfect record, plus two routs as a Chaser. He raised it into the air, though only people with omnioculars could see it, and then did a graceful swan dive down to the field.

The dive was slowly and very lovely to look at, unless you were our man Ray Elwood, who between the time Harry caught the Snitch and actually showed it to Respert, took a Bludger to the shoulder from Warrick, separating it quite nicely. He bore no grudge though, and readily admitted that he should have kept dodging until the end. The final score was 370-0 for Cortez, with Reiko again as the offensive star, scoring 20 of the Cortez' 22 goals. Jane Abbot had pitched her third straight shutout, a terrific defense again leaving little idea of what she could really do.

During lunchtime, Harry reiterated to the AQA people that he had little interest in playing Australasia, but he made sure that they understood that he and Warrick were a package. So while it would be lovely for Warrick to be a first round pick, that had better come via a trade, not some team endeavoring to play chicken with The Boy Who Lived.

"I've sat out a season before, I can do it again very easily. Or I can just pick a team Down Under and sign a one year deal." He said all of this in his friendliest voice, and the teams took no offense at the bargaining. They all liked Warrick as a player, though the prize was really going to be Marty, once he graduated. They told Harry and Warrick, in a moment of professional candor, that Marty Coyle was already considered one of the top five Beaters in the four schools, in terms of potential and current play, probably in the top three even, and he was only just 12, still a Novice with over six years of school to go.

They assured Warrick that he was still better though, you can't coach size after all, and he had gotten better with every year that he had played.

The second match was what the twins called the "Spooneybarger Miracle". Shawnee Keeper Tim Spooneybarger probably played his way into being a second round draft pick by the AQA by limiting Sally Jenkins to 12 goals in just under an hour's play. His defense was a little more stout than against Cortez back in October, and he played with a confidence that he had never really had before. The Cortez game had done something to him, and while Shawnee still got killed, 270-10, he played a terrific game, stopping 36 of 48 shots on goal. There were numerous scouts still in the stands, wanting to see

Jenkins, and all of them were speculating afterward on what Spooneybarger could do with a team that actually played defense in front of him, or Beaters that managed to hit one of the other players. The second part had not happened all season.

For the second time all season Tim left the field on the shoulders of his Housemates, Claudia included. They had Proctor coming up in five weeks time, easily the worst offense they would face all season, and now a victory did not seem totally pie in the sky. Tim, a bit below average as a student, had been planning to go to a smaller university first, but might have to rethink that now. The Cortez players, for their part, now knew that the Jefferson Seeker was not terrible, the other Chasers way below par, and the Beaters way, way below the battery that Marty and Warrick were capable of. The temptation to use Harry to mark Sally would become almost unbearable for Warrick, and he would tell any non-Cortez person, Jonas and Drew included, that he was still waffling on the idea. All Cortez had to do was tie and the Cup would be theirs automatically, as they were now 2-0, with Jefferson 1-0-1, Proctor 0-1-1, and Shawnee 0-2.

But now all thoughts turned to the Olympics, the first of two, which were due to start a week from Monday. The Seniors classes had already had one meeting, and tonight the Cortez group would have long one, eschewing any parties so that they could get it done. Not a one of them was a Quodpot player either, so no one had to rest for the next day's game. Armed with last year's Olympic roster, grade reports for all the students, and a lot of pop, the Cortez Seniors congregated in Harry's trunk, where they could get some privacy. Mindful that last years' Seniors had needed a total of 15 hours to get all of this done, they managed everything by midnight, for a total of 11 hours, which they felt very proud of. Those few who had not been in the trunk already were suitably impressed, and even Joe Clancy spent most of their breaks looking over Harry's library. He did not ask to borrow any of the Potions books it contained, but Harry could tell that he wanted to.

The group found it just as difficult to give out assignments as they had always heard about. It wasn't about filling a roster, but was more along the lines of a puzzle, some people were easy to slot because of limitations in either their own talents or that of their particular year,

such as Harry, Warrick, and Reiko with The Flying Challenge. It greatly helped that Murray and Heyman had not changed any of the events from the previous year, though it was not only their decision, or so they later told some of the Seniors. The four schools used the same program in each of their school Olympics every year, so as to allow the outside judges some familiarity as things went along. All four Headmasters/Headmistress had agreed to keep the same events, all of them thinking it would give their people an edge due to that same familiarity. The Seniors saved their own slots for last, with Reiko in particular insisting that she actually get a chance to win this year, after being the good soldier in previous ones. No one was really interested in arguing with her, though many side deals occurred during the 45 minutes they spent discussing their own year.

Sunday, May 3, 1998

Cortez Lounge

3:00 pm

The announcement had been made at lunch, after a narrow Proctor win over Cortez in Quodpot, and was handled by Warrick:

“All Cortez people are to assemble in our Lounge at 3:00 pm to get their Olympic assignments! Anyone not there.....well you had better be there.” The buzz in the room was raised another level, as none of the other Houses were prepared to announce their lists as of yet. Drew and Jonas immediately got up from the gang’s tables and motioned for their fellow Jefferson Seniors to follow them, as they quickly planned another meeting on picking their own roster, vowing to have it up that night after dinner.

Once in the Lounge, after watching Jonas and Jefferson pound the living crap out of Shawnee, Warrick raised his voice, non-magically, and addressed the throng.

“All right you people, listen up. Novices go to the northwest corner of the room, Freshmen to the northeast, Sophomores to the southeast, and Apprentices to the southwest. Transitions form to my

left, Juniors to my right. Go now.” When giving directions, Warrick had helpfully pointed out where to go, and while the kids did not move with anything close to military precision, they got where they needed to be in relatively short order.

“Okay then. A pair of Seniors will hand out your assignments and answer any questions you might have. I would like to remind you of a few things: First, all decisions are final, unless you are physically incapable of doing the event, in which case you had better have a great reason for not informing us before the meeting last night. Second: a reminder to you that the top three finishers in each event will represent Great Lakes at the big competition in Salem, that said, we have slotted you to win here, not there. Third: anyone caught cheating will suffer as they have never suffered before, and that punishment will come from us, on top of what the faculty will do to you. And last: anyone unfortunate enough to finish last in an event, or well below what they might otherwise be capable of will not be mocked or teased in any way by any person here. Again, if that is violated, you will answer to us. We finished second last year, but it was far and away a tainted second, since Jefferson had two potential high scorers killed while defending the school three months earlier, while we here in Cortez benefited from Fred and George Weasley being able to pick their own House because of that same battle. So no complacency here! We can win this!”

The younger kids were suitably scared, particularly when they heard about the last two points. The six younger years got their assignments in the next minutes, and while there were a lot of complaints, they were made respectfully enough that no Senior had to hex anyone.

Reiko had gotten her wish and was doing all three Charms events, plus The Flying Challenge, even she agreed that she was needed there. Harry had a choice to make between the Dodge-a-thon and the Shield Builder, and was emotionally blackmailed into picking the former, since he would undoubtedly be the favorite in the four school competition in that event. So to his mild irritation, he would be doing the same events as last year, no variety in his program. He was reminded over and over again that he had won all four of his events

last year, and there was no reason to mess with success now was there?

The Olympics were only eight days away, and there was a buzz in the air.

End Chapter

Author's Note: This is the Olympic chapter, and it's going to be done a bit differently than before. The chapter is broken up into three acts: Great Lakes Olympics, miscellaneous happenings that I'll let you discover for yourself, and then the four school Olympics. For those of you that do not dig the Olympics, simply skip down to the middle of the chapter and go from there. You'll miss out on some fun things, but nothing that involves Voldemort. The Voldemort stuff is in the middle, and please remember that this story is AU and I don't feel bound by events described in Prince and Hallows. For those of you that are going to read the whole chapter, know that since the events this year are mostly the same as last, I'll be skipping a lot of the descriptions of the rules, largely in order to streamline things. Go back to Chapter 21 for a quick review if you need to. I know that these things seem like a waste of time to some of you readers, but I dig writing them, and I won't rush the narrative of the story just so that I can be finished with it. One last point: The muggle attacks brought up in the last chapter and continued here obviously never happened, so my 'scapegoats' for them and the reaction of the muggle government are of course fictitious as well.

Monday, May 11, 1998

Just outside the Great Lakes main building

9:30 am

The first event for Harry was the Flying Challenge, in which he was joined by Jonas, Marty, Reiko and Warrick. Drew was over in the Shield Builder competition, where he was attempting to become the first three time winner of a Defense event in Great Lakes history. Claudia was doing the History Trivial Pursuit, where she was the heavy favorite, while Marie was doing the Muggle Studies Trivia Challenge. Sophie, doing a slightly different program than in years past, was sitting out today, as was associate gang member Rachel Kessler.

At stake was more bragging rights for the individual Houses, as Jefferson was running away with the Carver Cup standings yet again, and likely wouldn't be caught even if Cortez blasted them at Quidditch, since it would be off-set by an equally large victory by Jefferson at

Quodpot the next day. For the gang it was their last go at things, as well as a chance to see what Marty, Keisha, and Anna could do. Keisha and Anna were entered into the Potions Swelling Solution competition, and would be occupied all day there.

The first round went as slowly as ever, there were fewer government helpers this week, since Pathfinder was doing their Olympics at the same time, though the three hour time difference would make a little difference. Marty went last in his year, and put up a terrific time that lasted quite the long while before an Apprentice Quodpot star for Proctor beat it. Marty stayed in the top 10 for quite awhile, until Sally Jenkins of all people knocked him out. Marty could be seen swishing an imaginary Beater bat in her direction, to the laughter of the gang members present.. He would wind up 18th in the round, all but clinching first place in his year, only two others had made the next round from the Novice year. Marty was prevented from being cocky about all this when Jonas slyly asked Harry:

“So Harry, where would you have finished as a Novice at Hogwarts if they had had a Flying Challenge?” Marty perked right up, he wanted to hear the answer more than anyone.

“First probably.” And he probably would have too, he was by far the fastest on the Gryffindor team every year that he was on it, and one of his former teammates was now the leading scoring Chaser in the BQL. The difference between him and Jonas though, is that Jonas got better every year, whereas Harry was pretty much the same flyer as he had been in Third Year, which he considered to be his peak Quidditch year.

So that nipped things in the bud, though Marty was still proud that his multi-subject tutor was The Boy Who Lived.....and The Boy Who Had Time to Mentor Him. Harry and Jonas went first and second in the opening round, with Warrick and Reiko safely into the next round as well. They got everything done in the round before lunch, much to the organizers' relief, and the second round started right on the stroke of 1:00. The second round eliminated none of the gang and associates, and after that round they were joined by the victorious Claudia and Drew, who had won their events. Claudia stomped the

field in the History Trivia Pursuit event, while Drew fought off, figuratively, a hard charging Liesel Matthews in the Shield Builder. That was one thing Harry could not do, win an event three years in a row, but Drew simply smiled with the satisfaction of a job well done.

Marie got there halfway through the third round, having finished sixth overall and fourth in her year in the Muggle Studies Trivia Challenge, just in time to watch Marty get eliminated and finish 16th, the best Novice finish in the Flying Challenge since Jonas did him one spot better back in 1992. Warrick and Reiko scraped into the finals at 12th and 13th respectively, which clinched Warrick's best ever showing in an overall placing. Harry and Jonas sat out the second and third rounds, still firmly ensconced in first and second place.

Reiko went second in the final round, and held serve, clinching 13th at least, with her best ever time in this event. She didn't really love to fly as the boys did, but she liked that Quidditch kept her in shape, and proved that she was not just a brain. Her best ever time did not hold up though, as Warrick proceeded to out touch her by just four hundredths of a second.

"I can't believe you beat me! Don't you know that you're supposed to let me win!?" That set everybody off to laughter, and Reiko proved that she didn't mean it by kissing her boyfriend/perhaps fiancé.

"It's for the good of the House Reiko, I have to get all the points I can Miss Number One in the Class." Warrick trailed behind his lady in every school subject, and in the past hadn't even been able to beat her in this event. Of course he weighed twice what she did, and that did tend to slow him down.

While this was going on, the next two flyers failed to top Reiko's score, putting Warrick into the top ten, and Reiko just out, as that's all she would advance, down a spot from the year before despite her faster time. Sally Jenkins would finish a strong third, with our man Ray Elwood right behind her. It was Quidditch day in the Flying Challenge, as there were no star Quodpot Seniors not named Jonas.

Finally it was down to Harry and Jonas. Harry, in the second spot right now according to the second round times, would go first. His split time there was the fastest so far, and he got the hoop perfectly on his swimming style flip turn. He touched down and found that he beat Jonas' score barely, but enough. He had clinched second place, and Harry was convinced that he could not have flown any better.

This was of some comfort to him later on, as Jonas proceeded to fly his brains out and beat Harry by .11 seconds. It took a daring turn, but Jonas started better than any of the other flyers, taking less time to get going, the perfect combination of power and speed. He pulled in and the scoreboard read:

STEELE, JONAS 1.08.43

POTTER, HARRY 1.08.54

More than a few jaws dropped, as defending champion Harry Potter had just gotten beaten in his opening event, by one of his closest friends no less. The crowd was stunned, and Harry was the first gang member to collect his wits. He walked over to Jonas, and reminiscent of Drew at the Reducto Challenge the year before, raised Jonas' arm in victory.

Jonas looked as happy as anyone had ever seen him, time with Ginny included. He had long been the best flyer in his class, and had barely lost out to Harry the year before. It was his first, and no doubt only, Olympic victory, and it was very sweet. The gang all crowded around him, slapping him on the back, or hugging him, or both. Harry whispered in his ear:

"We're even now mate, just one race to go." They both shared a laugh, as the best Quodpot player in America had just nipped the best Quidditch player living in America. The Chronicle had had a field day with Harry winning this event last year, and it would do so again this year. The rubber match, finals category, was in less than a month at Salem.

“I can’t wait dude, as long as one of us wins and the other second again.”

Everyone trooped back to the Lounge, where Anna and Keisha met them after a long day in Potions. They had finished first and second in their year, though very far down the overall standings. Those people in Cortez expecting Harry to be pissed about his loss were to be very disappointed, he was as happy and celebrating as anyone. He even took a moment to congratulate Joe Clancy on his terrific Potions performance, which flabbergasted more than one person. Harry was determined that no one see his disappointment, and it was definitely there, as he didn’t want to cast the remotest sort of pall on Jonas’ victory.

Of course Jonas wasn’t Ron, he won things all the time. He hadn’t lost a Quodpot game in over four years, and before Ginny, won the favors of many a Great Lakes and Peekskill young lady. But Harry was, on the whole, extremely careful with the competitive egos of his American friends, and wanted no doubts here, none. It was a great day for the gang overall though, as they racked up tons of points. Jonas, Harry, and our man Ray Elwood would represent the Seniors at Salem.

The winners for the day:

Jonas Steele, Senior, Jefferson, Flying Challenge

Claudia Cregg, Senior, Shawnee, History Trivia Pursuit

Drew Baylor, Senior, Jefferson, Shield Builder

Miguel Alvarez and Joe Clancy tied, both Seniors, Jefferson and Cortez respectively, Potions Swelling Solution Contest

Janet Livermoore, Senior, Proctor, Muggle Studies Trivia Challenge

Jeff McMahon, Junior, Cortez, Arithmancy Problem Solver

Tom Hughes, Junior, Jefferson, Astronomy Map Quest.

Drew, Tom Hughes, and Miguel Alvarez were repeat winners in their events from the year before, with Miguel tying Joe Clancy in a somewhat controversial decision. The first day was by far the busiest day of the competition, with more than one person complaining about it. A lot of Defense type people missed Shield Builder because of the Flying Challenge, and likewise there were many in the History and Muggle Studies events who would have liked to have done both of them. Jefferson won the day with a dominant performance overall, continuing their long run of success.

Jefferson: 930 points

Cortez: 798 points

Proctor: 665 points

Shawnee: 572 points

The betting money was still on Harry to win the overall title, but now things were a little more dicey than last year. He was almost certainly going to have to win the next three events, and only in the Dodge-a-thon was he considered to be a lock. This would bear watching.

Tuesday, May 12, 1998

Charms Classrooms A-D, Ancient Runes Classrooms A-B

10:00 am

The gang was in three places again this day, as Reiko and Jonas were doing the Charms Animation event, with Sophie and Warrick in Ancient Runes, Claudia, Marie, and the Little Three were all in Muggle Studies, with Harry and Drew taking the day off. The Little Three didn't have Muggle Studies as a class, but there were slots in the event for Novices and all three lived in muggle neighborhoods anyway.

The Charms Animation event was pretty much what it sounded like. The contestant was to pick from many objects on the floor and animate as many as possible within the time allowed. There were no

'style' points as such, for making them do creative things, it was an event solely based on seconds animated per object, the definition of 'animated' meaning that they had to be moving the entire time. It was a slight more taxing version of the Charms Air Apparent event that Reiko had won the year before, even though Harry never told her that he skunked her score later on in private. Reiko hadn't done this particular event in four years, and Jonas never at all, despite their high Charms rankings in their class. But now that they were Seniors and on the selection committees, it was a different kettle of fish altogether.

The first round of three was done in four separate classrooms to get it all done before lunch, this being a full field event of 84, 3 X 4 X 7. Reiko went early on, as the draw was totally random, succeeded in winning the round with a score of 234 total seconds. Jonas would finish in fourth, with 198 seconds, his victory the day before giving him a lot of confidence. It was a tiring event though, and both of them eschewed lunch to get in a quick power nap each, though not together of course.

While they had been doing their animating, Warrick and Sophie had been doing a Survivor style hunt for Runes, and the gang members there.....well there was just Harry actually, Drew having cheered on the Charms people, noted how impressively Warrick did. Neither he nor Sophie were in the Advanced class, but both easily slid into the semi-final round, Sophie was sixth and Warrick eighth. Warrick had only taken Runes in the first place because the idea of Divination made him laugh, and Muggle Studies just seemed like too much of a soft option. He had done Arithmancy for three years as well before dropping it for NEWT, having only gotten an A on his OWL there. As they walked to lunch, Harry having gone ahead to get the big table, Sophie felt free to ask Warrick something:

“So where's all this newfound Olympic brilliance coming from?”

Warrick laughed, he had figured that Reiko would ask him something similar.

“It’s the end you know, the last of these I’ll ever have to do. Plus, I don’t want to be the goat of the gang like always. I know I’m fighting Marie for it this year.” Marie was a decent student, but nothing more. She was in Advanced Potions, but that was her only Advanced Class, she was doing a pair of Muggle Studies events without being in the class too.

“I know it can’t be easy, four of us in the top five in the class.”

“Well I was always the number two athlete until Harry came along, so rather than pout about it all, I’m finally using it as an incentive to kick some ass. I know I should have done it sooner, but better late than never.”

“Two top tens if you can hold it here, that’s pretty good.”

“I can’t wait to see our boy in Reducto, he’s going to be burning to make a point I’m betting.”

“He has the Dodge-a-thon before that you know.”

“No offense, since you’re in it too, but he has that in a walk. I’ve heard that no one’s even taking bets on it this year.”

There was at least one, semi-sanctioned by the Seniors, bookmaker in each House, for the Olympics only, as gambling on Quidditch and Quodpot was very specifically banned. Their responsibility was to manage the side bets going on, and enforce payment if necessary. The one for Cortez was Harry’s Muggle Studies defense attorney Jake Bailey. Jake fit the profile since that’s what his muggle father did anyway, in Vegas, working on a sports book for one of the large casinos. Jake’s mother taught Arithmancy at Pathfinder, hence him being here.

“Don’t let him get cocky, he needs to focus.” Her friend just waved that off.

“Does anyone focus better than our boy? He’ll be fine, losing to Jonas is just what he needed. I’m kind of glad we’re not having a

dueling tournament or anything of the like, he'd give Doc Carter a lot of business." He knew that Sophie didn't like dwelling on that kind of thing, and was proven correct when she quickly changed the subject.

"What if Claudia wins?" This was the taboo topic in the gang, but Warrick didn't mind talking about with someone other than Reiko.

"Then the rules will change for next year, requiring a person to use their wand in at least two events or something like that, with flying counting as a wand event. I don't like the idea of her winning like that either, but I think the obstacle course will skunk her like it did last year. That'll save it." Claudia had garnered a single point in the last event the previous year, knocking her from third overall to seventh.

"Remember Michelle Ganoff winning two years ago? She could barely use her wand at all." Michelle had swept the two Ancient Runes and two Arithmancy events, and had more or less retreated back to muggle life since then, sometimes going days without using her wand.

"Those are different, since it takes some magic to figure them out I think. History and Muggle Studies don't, any squib could ace those. No Sophie, it's better if Claudia doesn't win the overall, or get that close to it. It should be someone from you, Harry, Drew, or Reiko, though my official position is that it should be Reiko." Last year's runner-up Jack Straw would have something to say about it as well.

"It won't be me, but I'd like to be better than eighth. I feel bad a little, rooting against Claudia like this."

"Me too, but that doesn't make us wrong. She's a brilliant woman, no doubt, and she'll stomp us all in our UVA GPA's, but magically she's not up to the four of you, and shouldn't be ahead of you in the Olympics."

Their conversation was cut short by their arrival at the Dining Hall, and they would say no more about it. Claudia was indeed out front in the Muggle Studies event, with Marie back in sixth place, and Claudia would win the event handily later on, Marie moving up one slot to fifth.

The Little Three went Anna, Keisha, and Marty in first, third, and sixth in their year.

Ancient Runes finished up first, with Warrick using his superior sprinting speed to knock out a terrific fifth place finish, edging out Sophie who finished sixth. Warrick was on quite the roll, picking up over a dozen places from the year before, while Sophie was up a spot as well. Three Juniors had finished ahead of them, so they finished two and three in the Senior standings, qualifying them for the four school Olympics as well, Warrick had been worried that he wouldn't get to go in any events, but no longer. The Ancient Runes Advanced classes held 11 students combined, so he and Sophie both leapfrogged a lot of students, seven in all, that in theory should have been ahead of them. A Cortez Junior won the event, so their House did pretty well for the event. They and Harry, who still had no clue of what was going on in Runes event besides his lady and roommate doing well, quickly raced over to Charms Classroom A for the Animation final round.

They got there just in time to see Jonas go, and he started off like gangbusters, again, as he got 22 of the objects on the floor to animate within the three minute time period. It took awhile to get the last 10 going, and the strain was showing greatly on his face as he kept them moving. He had fought hard to be in this event after his great performance in the Air Apparent last year, and proved why here, as he turned in the top performance so far. It seemed that he too did not want to be the goat of the gang. He finished with 211 seconds, which would get him another place as our man Ray Elwood could only do 209 seconds. Jack Straw, the defending champion in this event, would go 220 seconds, and since the scores did not carry over, all Reiko had to do was beat that and she would win.

She took a deep breath, and started with the easy options, three plastic Army men on the left side of the room. She got those going, and went to the gingerbread man and wedding cake couple, that one counted double, as she had them dance. The magic almost hummed out of her as within a minute she had 10 pieces moving, there were only 30 in all, so there was a finite score that could be reached. She picked up another piece per five seconds for the next minute, and then simply concentrated on keeping everything going. Maloney

called out with three seconds to go that she had won, but Reiko was there to the last, and finished with an event record 286 seconds.

Jack was now very grateful that she had skipped the event, or rather been forced to skip the event, last year. And he said so.

“Thanks for letting me win last year Reiko, that was amazing.” He, Jonas, and Reiko would represent the Seniors at Salem in June.

Reiko barely had the breath to say anything, she was completely exhausted. She shook Jack’s hand weakly and collapsed into Warrick’s arms. Jonas was now more alert than he was a few minutes earlier, and declined Harry’s and Drew’s offer to give him some magical help back to Jefferson. As they were all leaving, Maloney stopped Harry for a second.

“So, next Tuesday or next Thursday?” They shared a smile, Harry knew just what she was talking about.

“Surprise me please Professor Maloney.”

“Fair enough, I’m very much looking forward to seeing what you can do.”

“That’ll be a lot to live up to.” Sophie had stuck around too, Harry had told her, and only her, about his Air Apparent demonstration last year.

“We’ll keep it just between us.”

“We’d better, I got tired just looking at that.” He would score a 320 the following Tuesday, which unofficially was the school record, though no one would ever know it.

The winners for the day:

Reiko Aylesworth, Senior, Cortez, Charms Animation

Yuki Endo, Senior, Proctor, Herbology Grow Challenge

Katherine Matheson, Junior, Cortez, Ancient Runes Challenge

Claudia Cregg, Muggle Studies Problem Solver

Claudia was now two for two, with another event in which she was the heavy favorite coming up. Not one event with her wand though, and if not for her presence in Basic Combat, even more whispers would be circling the halls about her wand talents, or lack thereof. She was entered in the Obstacle Course as her sole wand event, and it was not out of the realm that she could win the whole thing, though Warrick's theory was more or less the prevailing one. Yuki Endo won her fourth Herbology event in the last three years, and the only reason that Beau Shupe had not hired her for Salem was that she only had to wait an extra year for a slot at Pathfinder, so she could teach there with her father, and the Salem Headmaster knew that.

The gang's standings after two days:

Claudia: 48 points, two events

Jonas: 42 points, two events

Reiko: 29 points, two events

Marie: 28 points, two events

Drew: 24 points, one event

Warrick: 22 points, two events

Harry: 20 points, one event

Sophie: 14 points, one event

Warrick was technically the goat so far, with 11 points per event, but Marie's harder events, a Potions one and the last History one, were coming up. Marie alone of the gang was not to use her wand this week, but that was more along the lines of slotting than anything, and not a reflection on her spell-casting abilities. Marty was second

overall in the Novice class, with Anna and Keisha also in the top five. Marty was so strong at flying that he was seen as a potential overall champion in a few years, given that everyone assumed that the gang would work with him in the wand categories. And they were right, Harry was working with him in Reducto and the others on the obstacle course, giving him and the other two youngsters tips on what they might have to use.

The day two standings:

Jefferson: 431 for the day, 1361 for the week so far

Cortez: 430 for the day, 1228 for the week so far

Shawnee: 385 for the day, 957 for the week so far

Proctor: 350 for the day, 1015 for the week so far

Wednesday, May 13, 1998

Defense Classrooms A-B, Charms Classrooms A-D with auxiliary use of Arithmancy Classrooms A-B for the afternoon sessions.

9:30 am

This the was the gang's lightest day so far, and would still be at the end. They would only be contesting the Dodge-a-thon and the Charms Marathon, and only Harry and Sophie would be in action in the first and only Reiko in the second. Everyone else would be spectating. This was another foreign event for Reiko, one that she hadn't done since her Freshman year, but she was so far ahead of every non-Harry, non-Drew person in the school that she was still considered the favorite.

The Charms Marathon, like its Transfiguration counterpart held the same day, dealt with casting a series of Charms for as long as one could, a minute at a time. Each Charm got more difficult, and the last one standing, won. There was only the one round, and it would be held in the morning for the younger students, and the afternoon for

the older ones. Marty, being rather large for someone his age and not that quick, had been dragooned into this event rather than put in the Dodge-a-thon. He led things off in his section, which was all of the Novices, the next three years up going in each of the other Charms classrooms. He lasted 22 minutes in all before telling Professor Westin that he had nothing left, which eventually put him first in his year. He, along with all the other contestants, was given a couple of vials of Refreshing Potion, which would ensure that he was not be useless for the next day's events, if he had one. He didn't though, he was due for the Reducto Challenge on Friday for his last event, he alone of the Little Three would not be doing the Obstacle Course. He would wind up 48th overall in the marathon, leapfrogging two dozen older students.

Reiko wasn't even there for the morning session, knowing that she would be going last in the afternoon period, and so was at the Dodge-a-thon to cheer on Sophie and Harry. The first round for the Dodge-a-thon took up the full two hours, as Sophie and Harry both advanced easily, only the bottom 30 were cleaved off. Harry still made a point of only doing just enough to win the round, but there was no rancor this time from last year's runner-up Sally Jenkins, she knew that it would take an injury to knock Harry out.

That was one thing that Harry found was REALLY different from Hogwarts: No one tried to injure anyone before a big game or the Olympics. The faculty had always stressed good sportsmanship and fair play, and relied on the upperclassmen to enforce those standards, and harshly punished any offenders. Indeed there was usually about one instance a year, and last year's had been the punch to Harry within a game itself. The difference, or so he had figured out, was that the nasty students, or the ones who gravitated toward that kind of thing, were spread out into the four Houses, rather than herded into one, like Slytherin. He could imagine the carnage at Hogwarts during an Olympic week, particularly with Snape as Head of Slytherin. He would turn a blind eye to any wrongdoing by his charges, and simply tell McGonagall that she was wrong, no matter how much proof or how many eyewitnesses. And he would get away with it too. It was all about Dumbledore keeping him happy so that he would spy for him again.

Harry would think about that, and sigh for the waste of it all. So much unhappiness because of one man's obsession with Voldemort. Such a waste.

Harry led the round by five seconds over Jenkins and 12 seconds over Sophie, who snagged fourth, a second and a half behind Freshman Karen Yeo, who had finished fourth last year. Anna Kessler, being barely 4'6" was so small that the teachers firing at her, Greenleaf and Potions teacher John Ryan, had a hard time drawing a bead on her, even in the somewhat narrow square she was in. She cruised into fifth place overall, much to the gang's delight. Keisha was further down the list in a solid 34th place, as this was one event where age didn't really matter as much as the others, since the younger students made up in lack of size what they missed in technique. Keisha would rally to make the final round, the top 30, and ultimately finish 28th.

After lunch Reiko stuck around long enough to see her future cousin-in-law make the finals, before she and Warrick slowly walked to the Charms Classroom A for her go in the Marathon. She would go last of the Seniors, right after Amanda Knight. It was another slightly tainted Charms event, as Harry and Drew, second and third in the school in that subject, would not be entered, but at least number one was there. Only the student and the scorekeeper were in each room, significant others and friends had to wait outside. In Warrick's case he was waiting awhile.

She started off with Levitation Charms, Wingardium Leviosa and it's siblings. Each charm was to be held for one minute, then a move on to the next. There were no breaks, and the next Charm in the series needed to be out the caster's mouth within one second. So in a way it was a matter of reaction times as well as endurance, which made the later minutes that much more draining. Her last Charm was the Patronus, which was the last one of the program, it took the form of a carp. She held it for a minute as she had to, and then the list was supposed to start over, there were 60 different Charms in it and she was the only one to exhaust them. She didn't know this though, this was one of the relatively few wand events where you went into to your turn blind. She got halfway through it when the plate she was levitating dropped to the ground, shattering. Professor Westin, who

was the monitor for this classroom, gave her the Refreshing Potion, and a pat on the back.

“That was magnificent Reiko, I can’t remember anyone having lasted this long since I’ve been here.” This was only Westin’s third year, but she was probably harkening back to her seven years as a student as well.

“Thank you ma’am.”

“Let me see where everyone else is.” Westin left as Reiko collapsed in a chair. Warrick rushed in.

“A dang hour! Wow!”

“I lost track after awhile.”

“Well its not called a marathon for nothing is it? That was amazing, I do love having a magically powerful girlfriend.” He picked her up and hugged her, he was so big and strong that Reiko could still rest. Westin quickly came back in, with Maloney right behind her.

“Congratulations Reiko, you’re the winner of the event.” Big smiles from all four in the room.

“Who was second?”

“Eric Liddell got to the 50 minute mark, but couldn’t go further. You have the second highest total of all time as it turns out, the record was set over 25 years ago at 67 minutes.” What Maloney didn’t say was that the record holder was our Lycan friend Michael Sheen, who was currently residing in Grand Rapids, Michigan and making plans. She would ask Harry later on if he wanted to try this event too in private, and The Boy Who Lived, while not wild about the idea, nevertheless said that he would before the school year ended. He was just as curious.

Warrick looked at her with pride, this was her second victory of the week and third ever.

“C’mon, let’s get to the Dodging Finals.”

“Just keep carrying me, I don’t want to think about moving.”

“That’s what I’m here for you know.”

“Why do you think I picked such a large guy?” Reiko had been part of the Sophie/Claudia pact of no guys til later on, Warrick was the third guy to have lasted beyond a first day, but she had always had her eye on him for more than friendship. And no, not just because he could carry her everywhere.

They got to Defense Classroom A just in time to see Anna Kessler do a time of 2:49.09, which was three seconds better than her second round score, and maintained her fifth place standing. Last year’s Novice shocker Karen Yeo followed and promptly broke three minutes, going 3:00.34, roughly seven seconds over her fourth place finish of a year ago, and 11 seconds better than Sophie had done in the second round, the scores of which did carry over. She was up next, and after a hand squeeze with Harry, entered the square.

Ripley and Greenleaf were firing at her, and the latter nailed her in the arm almost right away, which perversely nudged her out of the way of Ripley’s spread of salvos. Sophie recovered quickly enough, and proceeded to almost mimic Harry in a way. Harry was notable in that he barely moved when dodging, doing just barely enough to either not get hit at all, or get hit with just a graze, it was really more like flinching than dodging most of the time. Technically speaking, no one in the competition got hit more often than he did, but for far less damage per hit. Sophie had watched him closely in the first round all the while wondering why she herself didn’t do it that way. Her score in the second round was more along the lines of practice, and Karen Yeo watched in disappointment as Sophie soared past three minutes and wound up at 3:34.37, far and away the second best time, and better than anything Sally Jenkins had ever put up.

And that would still be the case, as the Jefferson Junior did her best to stay in third, putting up a personal best of 3:10.44. She walked off

the to the cheers of the Jefferson faithful, trying to come to grips with the fact that she had done her lifetime best, yet dropped a spot from last year. She still won her year, and would finish fourth overall in the Junior standings when all was said and done.

Harry got in there last, though with a bit of work to do as he had only clinched fourth so far. Ripley and Greenleaf, though they would never admit it, put a bit more force into their shots than for the other competitors, wanting to see what he could really do. So Harry was one knee almost as much as he wasn't, but his upper body control was such that they never hit him when he was half down. The yells from the crowd got louder after he passed three minutes, then four, then five as the two Defense teachers were now getting a bit tired, paying for their early intensity. Last year it had taken a slip to knock him out at 5:40, but this year he lasted until 7:13.88, and only because both teachers got him hard enough on each knee that it put him down for the count. It was a school record, as well as an American magical school record for the event, the Defense events never changed. Only Sophie got within half of his mark, and like Reiko in Charms, he was pretty tired at the end, simply sitting down in the square. He looked up at Sophie, who was just smiling at him.

"I'm really, really glad that I don't have to compete tomorrow."

A lot of Seniors said that this year, as the Senior class was doing better overall than any Senior group before them, giving out full effort in every event. The seeds had been sowed the year before with Harry, Drew, and Jack leading a dominant Junior performance, but there was clearly no Senioritis going on this year.

Sophie helped him to his feet and hugged him, and he whispered in her ear.

"I'm so proud of you, that was a great exhibition you gave." She could have said the same thing to him, and kind of did.

"You were the one who gave the clinic, my twitchy man." Heh heh.

"You know you love it."

“I surely do. Let’s go get some rest, I don’t know if I can stand up much longer.” They walked back to Cortez, not in any great hurry, it had been a good day.

The day’s winners:

Harry Potter, Senior, Cortez, Dodge-a-thon

Reko Aylesworth, Senior, Cortez, Charms Marathon

Jack Straw, Senior, Proctor, Transfiguration Marathon

Katherine Matheson, Junior, Cortez, Ancient Runes Decipher Cipher

Yuki Endo, Senior, Proctor, Herbology Safety Destruction Event

Harry, Jack, and Yuki were all repeat winners from the year before, with Matheson sweeping the Runes events this year, though she would score a bit lower in her other two and not be a factor for the overall title.

Standings after Day Three:

Jefferson: 584 for the day, 1945 for the week.

Cortez: 634 for the day, 1862 for the week.

Proctor: 490 points for the day, 1505 for the week.

Shawnee: 434 points for the day, 1391 for the week.

The first and second spots were rather more bunched than they normally were, with only two more full days of competition left, plus the Obstacle Course on Saturday. Jefferson was in front by 83 points, a slightly hefty margin, but down from previous years. This would bear watching.

Thursday, May 14, 1998

Charms Classrooms A-C, Potions Classrooms A-B

10:00 am

The unlikely partnership of Joe Clancy and Marie Ford highlighted today's events. It was the Potions team competition today, compressed into one day unlike the event last year. Last year's event was notable, and memorable, for having put Marie and Reiko together, which led Reiko to want to play matchmaker. The result was that Marie found herself to be more and more part of the gang, to her delight because it included Drew. Reiko had begged off the non-Charms events this year, so Marie had agreed to partner with Joe Clancy, who had kept his head down since the Pink incident of 17 months ago, and bothered very few people since then. Marie got along with pretty much everybody, and she and Clancy had agreed on how things were to work between them with little trouble. It had helped that Harry had made him a sweet offer.

"Joe, if you pilot you and Marie to victory, and I'll let you copy any two Potions books in my library, as long as your promise to share them with no one." He had seen Clancy eying those books during the selection meeting, and in a grudging kind of way he wanted to acknowledge that Joe had been a good boy since the Pink.

Young Mr. Clancy wanted to win anyway, but incentive always helped, and he and Marie were a smooth team as they made a perfect Shrinking Potion, and in the fastest time to boot. The trick with doing this was to balance quality and speed, as equal weight was given to both. They wrapped up before lunch, as it was a random draw, and simply had to wait until 4:00 pm to find out that they had won.

This partnership did not wind up including the University of Michigan bound Clancy in any gang activities though, that should be made clear. Harry was only willing to go so far, but and Joe did take an hour on Sunday to magically reproduce two of Harry's more rare Potions texts.

The other event on the gang calendar was the Charms Air Apparent event, which included Reiko, Drew, and Jonas. Drew was starting a three event in three day run, while Reiko was about to be finished for

the week, and in the one event that she was used to doing, and excelling in. None of the Little Three were in action, being saved for the Obstacle Course for the girls and Reducto for Marty.

The first round was all about getting to the next round, at least for Reiko. She only finished 16th during the opening round, there were only two total. She explained to Warrick that she was just tired enough that she didn't want to exert herself too much, and that they could all learn a lesson from Harry in the Dodge-a-thon. Drew went all out in the first round, feeling that he needed the practice after his layoff, while Jonas aped Reiko, finishing 13th in the first round, the top 30 made it to the finals. That was the one change this year, the scores from the first round did not carry over into a combined total. This was not Murray's preferred way of doing it, but it would be how the four school competition would be handled, and the other school Heads had outvoted her last summer when the decisions were made.

The one downside to all of this is that Reiko went relatively early in the final round, and had to suffer a bit while waiting to see if her score held up. She beat her last year's total points of 484 with relative ease, finishing with 543, managing to keep five objects in the air for over eight minutes. It was another second best of all-time score for Reiko, again falling behind Michael Sheen, whose name had been erased from all of the awards lists after he had invaded his alma mater with guns and explosives.

Jonas, continuing his surprising surge, managed 423 points, just missing out on a top three in his year point total, finishing fifth overall in the event. He was one spot behind Jeff McMahon, the Junior star who had finished sixth here the year before. He had all but wrapped up the Junior title by now, with just the Obstacle Course to go, and the futures betting market already had him as a 3:2 favorite for next year. Jack Straw moved up to the third spot, as he scored a 484 in his final round.

Last up was Drew, and he knew that he would need a perfect performance to win here. Alas, he did not get one. He managed to put nine objects into the air for over 250 seconds, but they all came crashing down at once, robbing him of the best score. He would find out later that he needed to keep all nine up there for just eight more

seconds to win. His 522 was the highest runner-up total in 59 years, and was fifth highest ever. He, Jack, and Reiko would all be going to Salem.

Today's winners:

Reiko Aylesworth, Senior, Cortez, Charms Air Apparent

Joe Clancy and Marie Ford, Seniors, Cortez, Potions Shrinking Event

Rachel Kessler, Junior, Cortez, Astronomy Selection Grid

Miguel Alvarez, Senior, Jefferson, Arithmancy Speed Work

Miguel Alvarez became the only student of the week besides Claudia to win events in two different subject, Arithmancy and Potions. He was another of the wandless wonders, as Reiko referred to him, taking nothing but the academic classes, including Muggle Studies with Harry and Jonas. Rachel was a repeat winner of her event, and had finished second in the other Astronomy event earlier in the week, being her best subject.

Reiko now had three victories and one 11th place finish, ending her week in a most satisfactory manner. She was the first of the main competitors to finish, having gone four straight days, and her total of 77 points put the bar up there a bit, and was by far her best ever point total. This was the Olympics she had always wanted, and she would be the heavy favorite in June, just having her pet events to play in.

The overall standings:

Jefferson: 450 points for the day, 2395 for the week

Cortez: 502 points for the day, 2364 for the week.

Proctor: 402 points for the day, 1907 for the week

Shawnee: 356 points for the day, 1745 for the week.

Friday, May 15, 1998

Defense Classroom A, History Classroom B, Transfiguration Classrooms A-C

10:00 am

This was the gang's heaviest day overall, with only Reiko sitting out. Harry and Drew would be in the Reducto Challenge, with Jonas, Sophie, and Warrick in the Transfiguration Build Upon, Jonas' last event of the week. Claudia and Marie were in the History by the Book, the last event for Marie.

The first round of History was the multiple choice exam, which Claudia aced for the third straight year. Marie was not as good at this part of History as she was at others, so she only finished 10th in the first round. The higher score you got then, the fewer correct questions you had to answer in the person by person portion in the afternoon.

The Transfiguration event was building a study this year, as opposed to last year's living room. There were only two rounds, one in the morning and part of the afternoon, and the finals at 2:30. That was the problem with full field events, the organizers did not want to start the kids too early, in case they got a bad draw, but had to leave time to get everyone in. The compromise was either 9:30 am or 10:00 am, which was just fine for Harry, who liked to stay up late, be it with Sophie or his NEWT studying, and was usually not raring to go at an early hour.

The Seniors used the first round as practice, since any halfway decent student in that year was almost guaranteed a slot in the finals. Warrick focused more on quantity, while Sophie and Jonas were eying quality. Jonas alone was not in the Advanced Class in Transfiguration, but in order to keep out of the Potions events, he had to pull duty here. He made the finals with ease, but would only finish in 16th place overall, out of the points for overall and class, though just barely in the latter category. Warrick, new to Advanced, also got into the final with no trouble, as did Sophie.

Jack Straw was the owner of this event though, winning last year and pulling top tens the previous two. Again he was hurt by the scores not

carrying over, but his performance still ruled the day in the morning session.

While this was going on, the Reducto Challenge was drawing all the spectators, eager to see if Harry could be even faster. Magicals tend to get a burst of power once they reach their majority, and Harry had turned 17 between these Olympics and the last set. First up was Marty though, and everyone got quiet:

“Begin.”

Marty wasn't up for any quick draw theatrics, his wand was ready to be trained on the stone and immediately spat out Reducto after Reducto. Harry had told him to focus on one spot on the stone, and let the magic flow out and against that spot. It was hard work, being tutored by Harry, but Marty had grown fond of it, and the tutoring was rewarded as he pulverized the stone in just 10 shots. Most Novices needed at least 15, more often it was 20. His score would hold up, yet again, until the contestants reached the Sophomore stage.

Eventually it got to Drew and Harry, who went second and third. Drew's technique was smooth and flawless, which made up for the fact that his reflexes were never going to be close to Harry's caliber. This was where not liking sports hampered someone like Drew, nor did he especially go for video games, another reflex enhancer. Once he reached Auror status, if he wound up choosing that path, he would have a lot more time to practice the repetitions. But now, he was content to blast the stone apart in six shots, just like last year, only a hair bit faster. He was cheered wildly, and the cheering didn't stop as Harry took his five shots with almost inhuman speed, and garnered the lead, as expected. This was another event where the four bookies were reluctant to take bets. Even the Jefferson side of things figured on Harry/Drew, not Drew/Harry. Harry was glad to put on a show, but did no fist pumping or anything like that.

In the afternoon session, Claudia cleaned up in defending her by the Book title, with Marie finishing ninth. Marie was now done with the competition, and her overall was a lot higher than in years past, thanks in no small part to her Potions triumph with Joe. She would be

cheering everyone on at the big event the next day, this year joined by Reiko, not Sophie.

In Transfiguration, Jonas got his 16th place finish out of the way, and was content with that, finishing up his Olympics with two spots in the four school competition to be, and his highest ever point total, even though he only scored in three events. He just sat back and waited for Sophie and Warrick. He didn't have that long to wait, as Warrick had gone in 11th. Warrick would make a nice looking bookcase and a few desks and chairs, but none of the knickknacks that were de rigueur for high scores. He would finish ninth overall.

Sophie went next to last, and benefited from Reiko and Drew, both ahead of her in Transfiguration, not being there. She did everything that Warrick did, only adding some personal touches to it. Her study had wall to wall bookcases, an aquarium, and various other interesting features. It was a combination of the trunk and The Hollow, not that any of the judges knew that, and scored high enough to keep her in second place. She would stay there though, as Northwestern bound Jack Straw did just a little more in the five minutes they were allowed. He was the number one Transfiguration student, and showed exactly why.

That said, Professors Palmer and Washburne would make an interesting plea to Murray and Heyman following the event. They did not care for the fact that Drew and Reiko were both forced to skip all of the Transfiguration events, and proposed expanding the Olympics to two weeks next year, giving all of the wand events their own day, while also either expanding or eliminating the four event per student maximum. That way all of the top students could compete in their favorite events. They were joined in this by Professors Westin and Maloney, both burned from limited Drew this year and no Harry in either year. Murray said that she would take it under advisement, which meant no, but the foursome would not give in so easily, and would go about gathering votes among the rest of the faculty.

Meanwhile, in Reducto, Marty was knocked out in the second round, finishing in 34th place, leapfrogging a ton of older competitors, to the point where Harry and Warrick would get a lot of curious questions

later on about how much they had helped him prepare. Warrick's response would be:

"Show me a rule saying that we couldn't tell him what was coming. Show me that, and you'll have a case, otherwise don't be jealous." That did shut up most people, and Marty would cruise to the overall title among Novices, winning three events and placing sixth in another, for a total of 41 points. He would technically outpoint his older cousin, but that was due to the vagaries of the points system.

The last round was all buildup for Drew and Harry, though the Cortez people on the whole were doing better than ever. It was a sports like atmosphere as Drew took his spot at the line. He looked at Ripley and nodded that he was ready. The teacher counted to three in his head, no motioning allowed, and said the magic word:

"Loose!"

Drew's wand flashed up as quickly as he could, and let as much magic flow through him as possible.

"REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO!"

And that was all he needed to reach the center, just four shots. It was about as fast as Harry had done his five, and Drew's score was now the highest, a school record. Harry's face had a 'oh fine, so you're going to make me work for it eh?' look to it, as he slapped hands with Drew on the way to the starting line. This was his favorite event, but Harry had been lobbying Ripley to make the stone move next time, saying that in combat your target is usually on the go.

"That's all well and good for you Harry, but the Novices and Freshman would have a nightmarish time in the event. I doubt most of them would even hit the stone, no matter how big we made it."

"Marty would."

"One out of 24, that's a terrific ratio. And one that's been tutored by the most gifted students in the school, hardly a realistic example."

“At least test it in class one time, see how it plays.”

“I’ll do that much, I’ll see if I can arrange to get you back here to see it.” Ripley liked that form of the idea, trying it in class, he wasn’t just trying to shut Harry up about it. Just.

Harry wasn’t about to do any quick draw histrionics, he had his wand at his side, knowing that he needed his A game here. He kept his eyes on the prize, while giving Ripley a thumbs up that he was set to go.

“Loose!”

“REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO!”

Harry’s start, like Jonas’ in the Flying Challenge, was what made all the difference here. His wand spit out the first curse faster than any other, and after that it was only a matter of two seconds as Reducto number four finally did the trick. In fact Reducto three almost did it, but not quite. He needed the same number of shots, and three tenths of a second less to do it in. He was the winner.

Once again Drew was class personified, raising Harry’s hand in victory, even though he had again done his best, breaking the old school record. Only to see it fall two minutes later. Two years ago, it was widely assumed that Drew would now be celebrating back to back overall championships, having won the previous five titles in his year. But then Harry came. He could still win the overall, but only if there was a Harry slip in the last event.

Today’s winners:

Harry Potter, Senior, Cortez, Reducto Challenge

Claudia Cregg, Senior, Shawnee, History by the Book

Jack Straw, Senior, Proctor, Transfiguration Build Upon

Claudia and Reiko were now the only ones in the competition with three victories, with one to go for the former. Jack Straw, again skipping the Obstacle Course, had finished his week with another win, making five in the last two years, second only to Harry in that span. He was not a factor in the overall this year, but it was still an impressive two year run for him, and he would hold his lead over Harry in the class rankings as well, finishing fourth there.

The overall standings, with one event remaining:

Jefferson: 374 points for the day, 2769 for the week.

Cortez: 388 points for the day, 2752 for the week.

Proctor: 276 points for the day, 2183 for the week

Shawnee: 330 points for the day 2075 for the week.

It was as close as it had been in years for the House title, with just 17 little points separating Jefferson and Cortez. It would probably come down to more than Harry or Drew, and the betting money now was on how Sophie would do. She had last done the Obstacle Course in Apprentice Year, back in 1995, but that was before she had met Harry and gotten what everyone assumed to be massive training in Defense type things.

And for once, assumptions were correct.

The gang standings after Day Five:

Reiko: 79 points, finished. Three events at Salem.'

Claudia: 72 points, three events down. Three events at Salem, so far.

Harry: 68 points, three events down. Three events at Salem, so far.

Drew: 64 points, three events down. Three events at Salem, so far.

Marie: 62 points, finished. One event at Salem.

Jonas: 59 points, finished. Two events at Salem.

Sophie: 54 points, three events down. Three events at Salem, so far.

Warrick: 27 points, three events down. One event at Salem, so far.

In order to avoid being the goat of the gang, Warrick needed to win the Obstacle Course, and have Sophie finish out of the points. Not really that likely, though stranger things had happened. He had more than doubled his point total of a year ago though, and was confident that he would get something in the Obstacle Course. Likewise Jonas and Reiko had finished well ahead of their last year's point total, with Reiko clinching a top ten finish already, her first ever.

Saturday, May 16, 1998

Great Lakes Dining Hall, Great Lakes Athletic Field

9:00 am

There was just one event today, the traditional last day of competition. The Obstacle Course was always the highlight of the week, and the one event that most students got to see. Unless you were Harry, who so far had only seen it via pensieve. He would be going next to last this time, with Claudia taking the anchor position. As always, no one knew what the previous competitors had done, and most of the gang that was to compete decided to catch up on NEWT work. They were supposed to have done this at night, after the events, the Transitions and Seniors were deliberately not given long-term homework so that they could study for OWL's and NEWT's, but inevitably little studying got done, the kids saying that they were too tired to concentrate.

The Seniors were paying for this now, as Harry had Drew and Sophie work with him in Transfiguration, while Claudia worked with Jonas in Defense. Warrick was going over star charts with Astronomy wiz Rachel Kessler, with Jonas, Reiko and Marie living the easy life in the stands, waiting for everyone to come and do their thing. Anna and Keisha went relatively early, and Warrick just before the others had lunch. Harry again had to resist temptation to send Dobby out for a progress report, much as last year, but Murray had specifically made

him promise not to. It was important to her that everything remain aboveboard, particularly given that Harry was not in first place.

Not that anyone really thought that Claudia was going to win, all the betting money was on Harry and Drew. If Drew won with Harry second, it would be a tie for the overall title, since the head to head would be one each. There were other permutations, but Claudia and Reiko both thought that they had not much of a shot. At least with Claudia her fate was in her hands, while Reiko just sat in the stands with her lead about to go down the tubes.

Around 2:40 pm, Sophie was called to go. She kissed Harry, hugged Drew and Claudia, and was off. Harry stood up, looked at a watch telling him that he probably had three hours to go at this rate, and started pacing.

“I really hate this waiting.”

Drew and Claudia didn't much care for it either, but there was the bright side.

“Look Harry, one of us is going to win this thing, so just focus on that. We're going late because we're doing well overall.”

“I know Drew, but I'm still antsy.”

“Are you like this before Quidditch?” Neither of them had seen Harry do this before.

“Sort of, but I hide it so that the rest of the team doesn't get all tetchy.”

“So that's the secret to Quidditch success, if I'd only known that I would have gone out for the team.”

“Yuck, yuck. Say something Claudia, you're too quiet today.”

“I'm trying to focus guys, you might want to try it.”

“Oh who asked you.” That elicited a smile, and Drew chuckled as well as he opened his book back up.

Harry calmed down though, and got back to his History work, he had switched after lunch. At 5:15, Maloney came to get them.

“All right you three, it’s time.” They left their books and things for Dobby to take care of, and made the long walk to the stadium. Well it was only five minutes, but it seemed like a lot longer as they heard the cheers of the crowd for the competitor currently going. There was one other person waiting in the trailer, our man Ray, who was currently sixth overall behind Jack and the four gang members. He looked a little green with nervousness, but shook everyone’s hand as Greenleaf came to get him. He could only win the overall if Harry, Drew, and Claudia fell flat, but it was still on his mind as he wordlessly left the soundproofed trailer. Maloney stayed with them, but sensed that none of them were especially talkative at the moment. They couldn’t hear much of the action from the stadium, as the trailer had a few Muffling Charms inside it. They only knew that Ray was done when Greenleaf came.

“You ready Drew?”

“Let’s go.” More clasping of hands as Drew took off.

It was a long five minutes, as there was still quiet in the room. Finally, Greenleaf came back.

“Harry, it’s time.” Harry walked over and surprised Claudia with a hug.

“Good luck out there Claudia, I’ll be cheering for you no matter what.”

“Thank you, give it your best.”

“I will.”

He followed Greenleaf out the door, and go to the start finish line. He barely took in any of the people around him, and did not notice Sophie and Drew leaning against the front pole of the Cortez section of the stands, waiting for him to finish.

“All right then Harry, you remember the rules. Nothing Dark, only your own licensed wand, and so on and so forth. It’s the same spiel as last year, and Tom only gave that to you because you’d never done this before. You ready?”

“Yes sir, thank you.”

“Good luck, do what we know you’re capable of.” And he meant that, Greenleaf wanted every student to do his or her best, and if that meant Harry winning, so be it.

“I will sir.”

“Go on my mark.”

“Three.”

:”Two.”

“One.”

“GO!”

Harry sprinted forward and then understood why he hadn’t noticed much: The tasks had been Disillusioned until one of the teachers, in this case Dick Greenleaf, said the magic word.

The first obstacle of the eight was a 10 foot high magical fence, with handholds rather than a rope as was the case last year. The fence appeared to be made of metal, and Harry thought that old tricks were the best, and let loose:

“ABRUMPERE!”

Not reckoning on the Rebounding Charm that was all over the fence, but he was quick enough to duck as it came sailing right back at him. He laid down a Rebounding Charm of his own as he got there and bounced up. He was short enough that his hand barely got over the wall, but he was able to swing himself up and over the fence.

Dropping himself into a Weasley swamp. The American government placed such a large order every month of them that even the twins would have had no foreknowledge of this. Harry looked up and saw another hurdle up ahead, a ten meter wide by ten meter long pool of what he really hoped was water. He laid down a small Earthquake spell to bounce himself out of the swamp, angling his posture so that he cleared the remains of the swamp, and then ran forward in a way that struck most people as insane given the obstacle ahead, until they saw the spells he was using.

“INCENDIO!”

“FUGERA!”

The Fire Spell started boiling the water, and Fugera was the most powerful Explosion Spell he had ever read about, it was usually used for tunneling through mountains and required immense magical power and concentration to fire. It blew a hole right through the pool and twenty feet underground, quickly draining the water. It had only been six and a half feet deep, one inch above the tallest competitor, so walking through might have been hard.

Everyone else swam, and Greenleaf and Murray, standing next each other at the start/finish line, were already wondering aloud if that could be repaired in time for Claudia.

Harry jumped into the now empty pool, ran around his hole, and hopped up to the other side, far and away the quickest through this second obstacle.

Next up was a small maze, looking very much like the one at the Tri-Wizard. A large sign on it said:

“No destruction allowed!”

Harry’s glasses were a little fogged from the steam he had created, but he still managed to take it in before he got there. The corridors of the maze were pretty tight, and the walls were laced with brambles and briars. He used his wand to point himself the right way, and after about 30 seconds and a bit of blood loss, cleared the maze and headed for the fourth obstacle.

Up ahead was a Dementor, or at least that’s what Harry saw, it was really a Boggart. Dementors were still the thing he feared most, though of the hundreds in the stadium, only he and the four former Aurors Murray, Ryan, Greenleaf, and Ripley had ever seen one live and in lack of color. He summoned up Sophie saying that she would marry him, and let fly.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Prongs rode again, to the gasps of everyone in the crowd, and the Boggart didn’t stand a chance, fleeing as fast as it could. Harry turned the corner and sprinted to the fifth obstacle, aiming his wand across his body.

“RIDIKKULOUS!”

The Boggart disappeared in a puff of smoke, halfway down, half to go. Harry was in better shape than last year, having practiced some sprints in anticipation of this event, and he was not tired at all as he met a familiar obstacle.

A pair of large snakes.

It was customary, or so he had been told, for at least one, if not two, obstacles from the year before to be repeated, and this seemed to be one. He didn’t bother with the Parseltongue this year, and just pointed his wand and left hand at them.

“REDUCTO!”

As the crowd well knew by now, Harry's Reducto was the best in show, and the snakes proved this by disintegrating nicely. He saw the next obstacle up ahead, it appeared to be three people aiming wands at him. All were wearing masks, and Harry slammed a Repulsar into the one in the middle.

Not so fast Harry, it passed right through, the 'being' was a magical copy, not solid. While he was digesting this bit of information, the real ones opened up on him with various minor jinxes and hexes, nothing that would disable anyone totally, but the point was to slow him down.

Harry jukeed himself out of the way of the first two salvos, and aimed wand and hand at both of them, whom he later found out to be Potions teachers Diego Chavez and John Ryan, various teachers had been filling these spots as the day went on.

"MOBILICORPUS!"

Once his, he slammed them together, just hard enough to make them dizzy, but not hard enough to break anything but a little pride. He raced on, hurdling their bodies, as he faced obstacle number seven.

It was another version of the Blue Mist that was used last year and that Harry had deployed against Tecumseh. He shouted Finite Incantatem at it, figuring it was no use, and was proven correct. A disembodied voice rang out:

"Who was the victor in the last Lycan War?" They had gone over Lycan wars in class this year, the question was different for each year student that came up to it. Harry yelled out what he assumed it wanted.

"No one, there was a negotiated peace!"

"You have answered correctly."

Any relief in that was quickly extinguished as the mist formed a large hand that reached out and grabbed Harry, sending him through the rest of the mist and hurling him ten more meters into a large soft

landing, the crowd had not gotten tired of this after 82 other times seeing it, and was in bedlam.

A landing that put him in a huge deposit of Devil's Snare, which immediately began snaring him. Harry had shared a few stories with the faculty, but never anything so specific as to include his first live encounter with this stuff. He put as much power as he could into his wand:

“INCENDIO!”

The resulting conflagration ensured that they would need some new Devil's Snare for Claudia, and got him free very nicely. After that, it was a short 15 meter sprint to the end, and he crossed the line on his feet this time, rather than bouncing across as last year. He looked to the scoreboard for his time.

POTTER, HARRY: 3:43.12

BAYLOR, DREW: 3:48.98

The gap was slightly more narrow than last year, but Harry had still retained his lead. The course was also more difficult than last year, which added half a minute or so to each person's time. What seemed like the entire faculty streamed out to the course, to rebuild the Devil's Snare and the swimming pool, as Harry walked over to Sophie and Drew. The former hugged him tightly, and the latter patted him on the back.

“That was great dude, you got me again.”

“I wouldn't be near this good if I didn't have you to measure myself against Drew.” That was quite a nice compliment, and Drew was pulled into the hug by Sophie.

“Thank you for that, it means a lot coming from you.” They broke it up after a few seconds, and Harry looked at his lady.

“So how did you do?”

“Fourth so far, behind you guys and Ray. I was 3:56.43, you two were the only ones to break 3:55. Warrick was 4:01.32, he’s in 10th so far.” They looked out to the course, and the Herbology types had put some new Snare in, and the pool was now the way it should be as Murray came over.

“I should have known that you would try to destroy the course.” She was laughing though.

“The rules say nothing against it now do they?”

“Are you ready to present the trophy to yourself?”

Drew coughed a little, getting her attention.

“Well ma’am, if Claudia does as expected here and I finish second, I would like to give it to him, if it’s alright.” No one present thought that Claudia would surpass the three of them, but the forms had to be obeyed.

Murray, not for the first time, mentally congratulated herself on letting Harry come over, if only because it brought this young man out of his quiet shell.

“Either way Drew, that would be just fine. Now if you three will move to the side, we don’t want Claudia getting distracted in the slightest.” No they didn’t, and they moved over to the underside of the stadium where Sophie and Drew had been before.

Not that it did Claudia much good, as she was no sprinter. She successfully dealt with the tasks well enough, aside from the swimming pool. That killed her, as she really couldn’t swim. She dropped in and walked on the bottom, putting a Bubble-Head Charm so that she could breathe. She wheezed, no pun intended, across the line in a time of 4:03.65, good for 15th place.

Murray put her wand to her throat:

“And this year’s winner, and only the second repeat winner in the history of The Great Lakes Olympics, representing Cortez House: Harry Potter!”

The crowd cheered even louder than they did last year, if only because Harry had had to fight a lot harder to win this time. He had lost an event, and Drew had really pushed him in two others. It humanized him a bit, he wasn’t quite the machine that those who didn’t know him assumed that he was. He waved to everyone, with a huge grin on his face, this had been a good day.

The Overall Top Ten:

Harry Potter, Senior, Cortez: 92 points

Drew Baylor, Senior, Jefferson: 84 points

Reiko Aylesworth, Senior, Cortez: 79 points

Jack Straw, Senior, Proctor: 77 points

Sophie Weir, Senior, Cortez: 75 points

Ray Elwood, Senior, Proctor: 75 points

Claudia Cregg, Senior, Shawnee: 72 points

Jeff McMahon, Junior, Cortez: 69 points

Katherine Matheseon, Junior, Cortez: 69 points

Oleg Penkovsky, Junior, Shawnee, 68 points

It was a wonderful day for the gang, with Marie also finishing in 14th place, Jonas in 18th, and Warrick in 56th, all three of them lifetime Olympic bests. Only Claudia and Harry of the gang hadn’t beaten their best finishes, they had finished first and seventh last year too. Harry made a point of congratulating Ray and Jack, telling them:

“Come over to Cortez tonight, there’ll be a party in my trunk. Just come with Anna, she’ll get you in.” The Little Three had all been keyed into the trunk a few weeks earlier, with only the Map 2.5 still to be shown to them. Jack and Ray nodded and congratulated him as well. The party in Harry’s trunk would last all night, and a crowd of exhausted teenagers would litter the heavily carpeted floor.

The Individual Champions, by year:

Harry Potter, Cortez, Senior Champion

Jeff McMahon, Cortez, Junior Champion

Sharon Penman, Jefferson, Transition Champion

Huey Freeman, Jefferson, Apprentice Champion

Riley Freeman, Jefferson, Sophomore Champion

Karen Yeo, Shawnee, Freshman Champion

Marty Coyle, Cortez, Novice Champion

Of the six returning year Champions, only Paddy Wang in Transition did not repeat, and that’s largely due to him not being there any longer, he had transferred to Pathfinder after a series of personality conflicts with his roommates. Sharon Penman, sister of Drew’s former friend with benefits Kristy, gladly took the title for her own.

The Final House Standings:

Jefferson: 2897 points

Cortez: 2893 points

Proctor: 2276 points

Shawnee: 2190 points

It was the slimmest margin of victory in Great Lakes Olympics history, and one gang event decided it: The first one. If Harry had beaten Jonas, then it would have been an eight point swing, and Cortez would have won by the same margin that Jefferson wound up winning by. It was that close, that one flip-flop of positions did it. Of course there were dozens of other scenarios like that, not just Harry and Jonas, but Harry did note his part in the loss.

Jefferson would cheer at dinner all the same though, and Drew did present Harry with his trophy, a nice gesture of sportsmanship that made the faculty very proud. Though everyone knew if they were going to Salem or not, lists were posted anyway, and the gambling lovers reached out to friends at other schools, wondering what the competition would be like. Salem and Tecumseh started their Olympics on Monday, and the four school Olympics was only a few weeks away.

Saturday, May 23, 1998

The Leaky Cauldron Private Conference Area

2:00 pm GMT

This was Harry's last Dark Force Defense League meeting as a student, the one the next month was two days before he started NEWT's and a sympathetic Rufus had already told him to figure on skipping it. It was a rote meeting by and large, with the sole topic of discussion being the continued attacks on muggles that were happening almost every day. The main problem with these attacks was that Voldemort was thinking big, he was not going after solitary people, but after muggle industry, and in one case, a sports pitch, targeting the home field of Coventry City, knowing full well that their Center Midfielder was married to the DADA teacher at Hogwarts. So far in this escalation over 3,500 muggles had died, and dozens more were dying every day. Rufus had thus far avoided telling Tony Blair that magicals were involved, not wanting to tell The Prime Minister that there was nothing he could really do to stop it except for surrender, and he wasn't even going to hint that that was a possibility.

Blair was no fool though, and like Rufus had noted, he had paid very, very close attention to his magical orientation, such as it was. So Blair was sending increasingly strident messages through the painting of David Lloyd George in his office, George having been, thus far, the only magical Prime Minister of Great Britain, though the man was considered a lesser Wizard by most. Rufus had not acknowledged the messages yet, still trying to come up with a plan that didn't involve himself committing suicide. He grieved for the slain, he was not a heartless man after all, but was at a loss as to what to do. The Aurors were doing everything they could to hunt down Death Eaters, to the point that Edward Grant and Alan Brandon, who had fulfilled their deal by bringing in enough dead Death Eaters, were kept on the payroll and given free reign.

This had the rather salubrious effect of greatly slowing down Voldemort's recruiting, once word was on the street that a pair of werewolves were looking for blood. It also got The Minister a lot of short notes with words to the effect of:

"This had better work."

Or

"It's your head if this comes back to bite us."

No one understood this better than Rufus Scrimgeour, and Brandon and Grant rewarded him by bringing in ten more Death Eater bodies over the next two weeks. None of them were above the level of a foot soldier, but all had the Dark Mark on their arms, so it's not as though the werewolves were shamming. Every little bit helped, or so The Minister thought, and one day soon the werewolves would torture some useful information out of their prey.....none of the bodies were delivered in remotely pristine condition. He put out a rumor in the muggle media that Muslim extremist groups were doing the attacking, and that seemed to.....well not 'satisfy' them really, but it made sure that there was no back trail to the magical population.

Once the meeting broke up, Harry pulled aside Arthur, Bill, and Remus, as the three older chaps walked back to WWW with Harry

and the twins. Harry had gotten special permission from Murray to stay later this day, as this was to be the first viewing of Dumbledore's pensieve. Harry wanted the other three there to explain things to him, and did not dare have Rufus or Travis there, for fear that they might try to confiscate the pensieve if it proved to be as loaded as Harry suspected it was. They hadn't brought it up though, and as The Ministry vetted all wills, they were aware of the pensieve. Sophie came up through the trunk, though officially for Remus purposes she came via portkey. Remus looked a little surprised, but said little other than greetings.

Fred brought out the pensieve, which had been under as many wards as possible at The Hollow, even though the house itself was under Fidelius. No sense taking chances though, and Harry and the twins both felt that this pensieve was probably the most valuable magical object in magical Britain. Not in terms of money of course, but in terms of interest. There was a short note attached to it, which the twins had been careful not to disturb.

Dear Harry or his heirs,

If you are reading this note, it means that I am no longer among the living, and my pensieve has come into your possession. I have filled it with mostly memories of the fight against Voldemort and his Death Eaters, as I want you to understand Harry what it is that you are fighting. You are a brave young man, and I apologize for my part in the tension that has developed between us. I hope that you will remember me, if not fondly, then at least with some compassion and forgiveness.

Albus

"Not bloody likely." Harry had read the note out loud, for the benefit of Arthur, Bill, and Remus, and his reaction was out loud as well.

The older three men looked a little uncomfortable at hearing that, even Bill. Bill thought that Harry should just let it go now, even if Harry's bitterness was let out just among family. He was disappointed to see the twins aping Harry in their disgust, Fred and George had more influence on Harry than any other non-Sophie people, and

should have led him away from that. Or maybe it was Harry with the influence on the twins, Bill could never really be sure, as it seemed to shift in impossibly random patterns. Whenever he tried to question either side about it, they would close ranks and pretend not to know what he was talking about. He had tried talking to his father about it, but Arthur would just tell him to give them time, at least until the war was over, it had been only a few months since Dumbledore's death after all. He was jerked out of his musing by Fred, or he thought it was Fred.

"So what shall we look at first? Dad, you're the elder statesman here, you pick something."

There was no 'guide' to the pensive along with the note, which was typical Dumbledore. So Arthur just dipped his wand in, and removed the first memory he came across. He performed the projecting spell, and it came up.

It was Dumbledore meeting with Snape, as the younger man was formally applying for a job at Hogwarts, and not for the first time.

Flashback:

"You realize, don't you Severus, that the rest of the faculty is dead set against you coming on board."

"They will do what you want them to, everyone knows that."

"Yes they will, but for once they are united in their belief that you would not be a good fit here."

"I take it that you disagree or else I would not be here."

"We need a Potions Professor, and you are the best qualified candidate that will serve. Horace Slughorn has gone away on another year long trip, and I have no idea what to do with the job if I don't hire you. So yes, you are to take Professor Askew's place on a probationary basis. Enough time has passed I think."

“What about Defense? If you can get someone long-term for Potions that would be my preferred spot.”

“No Severus, at least not in the near future. Hero to our side that you are, you still have Dark Mark on your arm, I cannot risk the faculty calling for my head. Minister Bagnold is already too inclined to listen to your old friend Lucius Malfoy too much as it is. I cannot give her reason to move against me.” An interesting revelation, and said a lot that Dumbledore had constantly been under fire from more than one Minister.

“I can take care of Lucius, that will not be a problem.”

“Nevertheless, if you want a position at Hogwarts, it must be in Potions, and for the foreseeable future.” He got a grudging nod.

“Very well, and I am grateful of course Headmaster, though I never seem it.”

“And I am grateful to you Severus, for your service in the war.”

“And what about Lily’s child? How is he faring with the muggles?” That gave the audience a start.

“He is doing fine, or so I am told. His aunt and uncle have taken him and are caring for him. I have someone in the neighborhood to keep a loose watch on things, and nothing has been reported as amiss. He will be here in seven years, ready to follow in his parents’ footsteps.”

“So he will be dying for the cause?”

“Severus.” Said quite sternly, as though Dumbledore did not appreciate jokes about it. That Snape did not mean it as a joke seemed to be lost on him.

“Sorry.” Though he did not look it at all, in fact he seemed rather pleased with the idea.

The two talked of more mundane things for the rest of the conversation, such as pay rates, Snape taking over Head of Slytherin, and how best to get McGonagall on board. Arthur ended the memory after 20 total minutes, and everyone looked at Harry.

“Lily’s child. Remus, please tell me that did not mean what I think it meant.” He was not answered right away, and assumed the worst, but Remus somewhat allayed his fears.

“It was rumored that early on, Snape had a crush on Lily, if that’s what you’re talking about. She was a very pretty girl Harry, he wouldn’t have been the only one. Beyond that, I don’t know anything to tell you.”

“Fair enough I guess. If you would like to pick next.....”

He didn’t want to really, but he put his wand in all the same and drew out another strand, which he then projected up.

It was Dumbledore and Remus, a conversation the werewolf had told them about in July, right after the murders of Lily and James.

“Have you gone crazy!? Putting Harry with Petunia of all people! She hated Lily, and would have killed James dead if she had any muggle firearm aptitude.”

“They are his family, they will care for him and let him grow up away from any celebrity.”

“That last part I agree with, but for the love of God Albus, Petunia? Look, I have enough friends in the muggle world that I can find someone to care for him during the full moon, I should be the one to take him.”

“You cannot do that Remus, for more reasons than Harry’s safety.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Ministry has named you a Person of Interest in the deaths of Lily and James.”

“Say what!? I wasn’t even in Britain when that happened, and I have witnesses to prove it.”

“They will not be believed. Peter is dead, Sirius is one inch away from a Dementor’s Kiss, and you are the only one of your group still alive and free. They will want, at the very least, to question you.”

“And you would let this happen?”

“Of course not, I have made arrangements to send you to Toulouse, France, I have contacts there that will set you up with living quarters and a small fund to live on.”

“So I’m to flee like a coward, to be implicated in abstentia?”

“The investigation will die down, and you will not be indicted, I will see to that. But go you must, and I mean tonight.”

“Promise me that you’ll look after Harry, that you’ll make sure that bitch and her idiot husband don’t mistreat Harry.”

“You have my word.” He handed Remus a portkey.

“This will activate in two hours, you have that much time to collect your belongings and get ready. Your contact’s name is Henri.” He also handed Remus a picture of an old looking man, presumably Henri.

“I have your word Albus.” It was strange to see 22 year old Remus talking to Dumbledore like that, but there it was.

The memory then ended, and Harry looked at his friend.

“Thank you for trying. I did believe you back in July, just for the record.”

“I know you did, but I’m glad that came out.” He motioned to Bill, next in the age line for picking a memory.

Bill’s memory wound up being the funeral for James and Lily. It had the usual speeches about the deceased and a lot of crying. And no Harry, he was not present it seemed, and Dumbledore announced as much. This was the day before the Remus talk, so he was still in Ireland at the time. Harry forced himself to watch, but he knew that this was the only time it would be played, at least in his viewing.

The twins picked out the next one, and it was Dumbledore and Snape again.

“I am telling you Albus, that boy is arrogant, foolhardy, and brazen. He will get all of us killed if we don’t do something to stop him.”

“I agree with you in principle Severus, but not in detail. Except about the arrogant part, I have rarely met a more humble child than Harry. For 15 years old, living the life he has, he has remarkable restraint about him. You have never been able to look at him and not see James.”

“Of course I see his father, the dolt looks just like him.”

“He is a dolt in your eyes only Severus, though I know that you pride yourself on contrarian views.”

“Losing Black will only send him over the edge, I hope you are having him watched better this time.”

“I am, there is always someone there, someone who is reliable. He’s been back there a week now and he has not so much as stepped outside yet. This will be a peaceful summer.” Those in the audience couldn’t help but laugh at the hindsight irony in that statement.

“Just make sure he is willing and docile for when I return from Nova Scotia.”

“He will know that you are coming. Just assure me that you won’t needlessly antagonize him while you are there.”

“I will do what I want to Albus, and if you don’t like it, you teach him.”

“You forget yourself Severus.”

“No Albus, I know exactly who I am.” He swept from the office, robes billowing as only Snape could make them.

The memories continued for another two hours, interrupted by talks about them at various times. The group of them had just watched Voldemort and Dumbledore in meeting where Voldemort asked for the Defense Against the Dark Arts job when they heard a fierce pounding on the door. Not the front door, but the door to this room here. Bill quickly sprang up and opened it, and found Lee.

“Our werewolf friends are here, and they have a couple of live bodies. I think it’s Theo Nott and his dad.”

The six of them ran out into the hastily locked up shop, to find out that Lee was right. Frederick and Theo Nott, looking much the worse for wear, were tied up very securely and lying on the WWW floor. Grant and Brandon were just standing there looking smug, this would be quite a large bounty for them. Harry hadn’t seen either of them since last August, and warily came forward to greet them.

“Are these the real deal?”

“Hello to you too Harry, and yes they are, we’ve had them in custody for over 23 hours now, and no change has been made. And you must be the famous Miss Sophie, breaker of 1,000 hearts by snagging our young friend here, or at least I’m assuming that that’s who you are.” Sophie nodded in affirmation of that, but was wary of getting too close to the two of them.

Harry, a bit irritated at being taught manners by someone with Grant's loose definition of morality, nevertheless shook hands with the two of them, and then bent down to the prisoners.

"They look like they've been through the ringer, where did you find them?"

Grant's smile grew, in homage to his and Brandon's cleverness.

"At the wife's grave on her birthday. We were looking over the dossiers and happened upon this little factoid, and since the birthday was the next day, we set up shop near the cemetery. We were far enough away that their scans didn't pick us, but close enough that we could get to them if they were there for more than 30 seconds. They planned to stay about 10 minutes, so we had plenty of time. We got them with long distance shots while they were distracted, and then they were ours."

Okay, that did deserve an homage of some sort, or so Harry and the Weasleys thought. Remus just looked like he was contemplating homicide, though against the Notts or his werewolf brethren was up in the air. Brandon saw this and commented on it.

"Calm down Lupin, we're not here to attack anyone after all, we've made a nice deal with The Minister. We did kill Greyback you might remember, a little thanks from you might even be in order."

Remus had lost the powers of speech now, and a relieved Harry turned back to Grant.

"So when did this happen? I'm betting that it wasn't today."

"Good bet, it was three days ago."

"And you've been doing what with them since?" Though it was an easy guess.

“Questioning them. We don’t have any Veritaserum and we wanted to find out what they know.” That was why they looked so bad, red marks all over the place on their faces. Remus finally found his voice.

“Are they bitten?” The answer was mildly surprising.

“Nope, we don’t want to risk them getting loose and abusing it. No, we had them ‘persuade’ each other. There’s no limit to the barbarity that a father will do to his son if he’s under Imperius. Right guys?” He spoke the last question to the Notts, who did not seem 100 percent conscious at the moment. Remus for one didn’t believe him, and walked over and checked the bodies.

He confirmed that there were none, and that the wounds were inflicted by wands and various muggle devices.

“You had some fun it looks like.”

“Well they wouldn’t cooperate otherwise Lupin. Here are transcripts of what they told us, we had a Quote Quill going the entire time. We left in the screams for you.” Brandon took out a shrunken bundle from his pocket and enlarged it. It wound up being 100 pages of dialogue, with probably 10 pages of it alone being the aforementioned screams. Remus skimmed some pages and looked visibly ill.

“That’s disgusting, you two should be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Yet curiously, we’re not. We wanted to show these guys to you before we punt them over to your Minister.”

“Any portkey type things on them?” Remus passed the notes to Harry, who read them with a blank face, but inside he was half sickened and half impressed by the brutality of it. Anyone but a Death Eater and he might have had sympathy, but with these two, who had planned his assassination just months earlier.....well he could rationalize that it wasn’t himself who tortured them. Sophie refused to look at the Death Eaters, but inside she understood that they would have done probably just as much to Harry, if not worse.

“No, and that’s the first thing we checked for, and asked about. They had a one-way job to get there, and were supposed to meet the rat on the way back. He probably saw us grab them or something, because he wasn’t at the rendezvous.”

Arthur was now skimming the notes, and murmuring things to Bill next to him. He looked at Grant.

“We’ll want to question these men with drugs of course, but this is some great information if it can be confirmed. I didn’t realize Voldemort was so low in troops, and that Nott was so high in his council.”

“Everyone sees that the other side is winning, and won’t risk getting on a losing team. Besides, with so many of the population under Fidelius, it’s hard to target wavering individuals.”

“Shall we send for Travis and The Minister now?”

“Don’t bother, we sent an owl to them a few minutes before we knocked on the door. We didn’t expect to find the Wizengamot Head and Hogwarts Headmaster here as well, but that’s just a bonus.” Grant was no longer the accommodating figure that he was when the intelligence gathering deal was struck, he knew how valuable he and his associate had become.

A minute of uncomfortable silence passed by, as Arthur continued to read the notes, and then there was a whoosh in the floo and five figures piled out, one after the other: Rufus, Travis, Rob, Edgar, and Head Auror Sanford Jenkins.

“Well hello there Harry and friends, didn’t expect to see you so soon.” Rufus walked over and examined the prisoners. The note had specified who they were, hence the fast action.

“Are you sure there are no portkeys on their persons?”

“Absolutely sure, and believe me, they would have told us about any of them. All that was on them was this:” He handed over a key to The Minister, and Travis was handed the notes by Arthur.

“This isn’t a Gringott’s key, it goes to the bank in Germany, I recognize the markings on it. Sanford, take it and some hair and go empty it. Half is to be set aside for our friends here, the rest into the general fund.”

“Yes Minister. Shall I take these two as well?”

“Not yet, I have to decide about what to do with them.”

“Yes sir.” Jenkins took a good firm grip on Theo’s head and ripped some hairs from it, repeating the actions with his father. He floored off, as Brandon helpfully put in:

“They have six million Galleons in there at last check, and this is the only key.” Which meant that it was still there, as Voldemort was not about to try strong through the door on another bank anytime soon.

Travis responded, he had been reading the notes.

“We’ll know for sure in a few hours about that. Interesting torture techniques, Greyback taught you well it seems.”

“He had his uses.” A nasty grin on Grant’s face that almost made Remus go for his wand. Travis just sounded a little blasé as he replied.

“I’m sure he did, sodomy as torture went out of style a long time ago, but it does seem to have worked. As soon as this information is verified you will get your money, as long as you agree to keep working until the war is over.”

“We will easily agree to that, under the same deal each time.”

“Of course.” Travis had other ideas, but kept them to himself. He watched as Rufus turned to Harry.

“Harry, have you had sufficient time with your pensieve, or shall I have Rob come back later.” Not a small hint was laid down in that question, and Harry felt that he had seen enough today anyway.

“I’m fine, Rob, I’m ready to go when you are. Sophie?”

“Me too, whenever you’re ready Rob.”

“Cool, I’ve got the portkeys with me, we can go right now.” He looked at Rufus, who nodded that that was fine with him. Harry and Sophie said their goodbyes, and were soon gone, on their last actual portkey ride for the near future, as Harry was going to put his foot down come July and his next League meeting, assuming he was still alive then. Travis and Edgar prepped the Notts for transport, and took them back through the floo, as Rufus stayed behind with the Weasleys, Remus, and Grant and Brandon.

“Edward, Alan, present yourselves here on Monday afternoon at 10:00 am, and we will get you to The Ministry for a debriefing and the confirmation of your money. You did good work, and I thank you.” He shook their hands, and made sure that they were out the door before turning back to Arthur and his sons.

“Fred, George, put up some anti-werewolf wards the moment our friends leave here on Monday.”

“Of course Minister.”

“On the stroke of 10:01.”

“Thank you men, and thank you for not asking why just yet. Don’t worry, everything will be made clear on Monday, I hope.” With that, very ambiguous statement, he left the shop, through the door this time. He had a dinner meeting in muggle London with a ‘friend’ who worked for Tony Blair. The Weasleys and Lee thought little more

about the whole mess, and after carefully putting the pensieve back in The Hollow and collecting Angelina, Alicia, and Molly, they went out to dinner in London.

Monday, May 25, 1998

Ministry of Magic, Great Britain

10:15 am

Edward Grant and Alan Brandon were ushered into The Minister's office, having been met at WWW by Rob and Edgar. They were invited to sit down, as Rufus was on a floo connection with Remus, talking about Hogwarts business. Travis and Sanford were also in the room, needing to be there just in case.

"Thank you Remus, I'll be up there tonight for dinner and we can talk about it more then."

"I look forward to it Minister, see you at dinner." Remus' head left the floo, they had a regular 10:00 am conference every morning.

"Well then, thanks for coming. We have used Veritaserum on Theodore and Frederick Nott, and confirmed all of your information. Your methods were a tad medieval, but the results were very good." Notts pere and fils were in the throes of the mixture right now, as there were more questions that needed to be asked of them. A week after this day, they would quietly be killed, and their bodies disposed of in a muggle toxic waste facility.

"What about the money?"

"It was all there, 6,001,456 Galleons and change to be precise. We certainly won't be having any budget crises for the remainder of the fiscal year, a good weekend's work, and I thank you for that."

"So the money is now being transferred to our account? It wasn't as of an hour ago." No it wasn't, and there was a very good reason for that, as Rufus nodded at his bodyguards.

Rob and Edgar, whose wands were out whenever they were with The Minister as part of their protection duties, flashed them up at Grant and Brandon.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

“Petrificus Totalus!”

They never had a chance, and were now frozen their chairs. Rufus got up from his seat and came to sit on his desk in front of them.

“I’m sorry it had to come to this, I really am. You were very useful tools for us, you brought in a lot of dead Death Eaters. You played a role Edward, and you Alan. But there’s no way in hell that I can justify giving two werewolves control of 3,000,000 Galleons, not for right now, not for the time after the war. You would have all the resources you need to build a better pack, one that we couldn’t control. No, I’m sorry that it’s come to this. Just know that I had no choice really, no choice at all.” He raised his wand at Grant, and Travis stuck his in the back of Brandon’s head.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Monday, June 1, 1998

Great Lakes Dining Hall

8:30 am

“Attention, all those leaving for Salem for the day’s events, stay here after breakfast is over, I have some things to say to you.” Murray sat back down, and everyone began murmuring again. Each event had 21 Great Lakes people going, three from each class, and Seniors were also allowed to go as spectators if they didn’t qualify. So the entire gang would be going to watch, or compete in the cases of Claudia, Drew, Harry, and Jonas.

As the competitors and Seniors remained behind, Murray had just one salient point to make.

“I want all of you, from the youngest Novice to the oldest Senior, to remember that you represent The Great Lakes Magical Institute, and you will behave as such. Any incidents had better have totally been started by the other person, or I’ll have you doing detentions until you’re begging for the sweet relief of expulsion. Seniors might just have their graduations delayed. Am in any way unclear?”

Everyone agreed that she was not, and the 160 odd students lined up for their portkeys. This was the most students that had ever left Great Lakes in one single day, but there were seven events this day, and 21 kids per event added up to a lot. One faculty person from each department, along with Murray herself, would be going along. Riley Poole gave the gang there portkey and a few words as well.

“Kick their asses, if you wouldn’t mind.” Harry reached out and shook hands with him.

“Ask and ye shall receive Riley. Don’t let the school burn down while we’re gone.”

“Thank God we’re not hosting this thing. Good luck.”

And a minute later, they were gone.

They reappeared outside the Salem outer perimeter, along with other groups that had come in before. Each of the three visiting schools had distinct areas that they port keyed to, and hundreds of students were descending on Salem. Harry spied Steve Atwood at a distance, he was entered in the Shield Builder, but after the Tecumseh debacle was hesitant about yelling a greeting, not wanting Steve to have even more questions asked of him. The gang collected the Little Three and walked toward the school, where their host, Beau Shupe, was greeting the delegations as they came up to him. Signs pointed to where the events were to be held, all but the Flying Challenge were to be inside.

“Hi there Harry, a bit of a change since you were here last.” Give the man credit, he did have a sense of humor.

“Somewhat different in the daytime sir, I wish you nothing but back luck.” Both of them laughed, and they shook hands as the flyers peeled off for their event. Sophie and Reiko went with them, with Marie and Warrick going with Drew to cheer him on.

The Flying Challenge was held in a different area than at Great Lakes, since their Athletic Field was further away. Harry and company just followed the crowd, and were soon getting the requisite reading of the rules, as if the 84 kids there had not already done this event at least once, or in the case of Ray, Jonas and most of the other Seniors, seven times.

“First up, from Great Lakes, Marty Coyle!” They went by year, and Marty just happened to pop out first of the dozen Novice names.

The distance was the standard roundtrip mile, only the setting was different as Marty kicked off, using a technique Jonas had taught him on the sly. He sped toward the goalpost in the Pitch, and did a tight left turn as he sped back, clutching the hoop.

“1:12.34!”

That was faster than either of the times Marty had turned in at Great Lakes, and he pronounced himself satisfied. He wouldn’t get 16th here, not with the flying crème de la crème competing here. Of the 84 kids, not a one wasn’t at least a reserve on a Quidditch or Quodpot team, and the vast majority were starters. Like he was actually, but 12 years old was 12 years old.

The time held up for another 15 competitors, and then slowly it started to get passed. The bottom 30 were the ones cleaved off, though they were welcome to stick around and watch the rest of the event of course, and Marty just made the next round, placing 52nd. It was the top Novice time, and since he was the only Novice to make the second round, he automatically won his year. Harry and Jonas

sandbagged a little bit, finishing sixth and eighth respectively, not wanting to give too much away, though they made much of Marty.

Meanwhile, Claudia was doing fine in the preliminaries of her event, while Drew, not believing in sandbagging, was in first place after the opening round of the Shield Builder. The Salem Dining Hall was jam packed when they got there, and they were directed toward one of the classrooms across the way, where auxiliary food service was being offered. Before they left for it, Harry made a point of finding Jessica Murray, not competing today, with a message from her mother.

“Your mom says that you’re supposed to sabotage things so that Great Lakes can win all the events.” Jessica smiled, and her three girlfriends all started giggling.

“I’ll get right on that.”

“You should, you don’t want to be grounded now do you?”

“Anything but that. Is Dobby coming by? I have some orders for him.”

“He’ll be around today at some point, I’m not sure what he’s doing now.” Dobby was at Pathfinder currently, as Sarah Hoerauf was not competing today either, and thus didn’t make the trip over. She would be there on Wednesday, and Harry was looking forward to meeting her for the first time in person.

“Good luck this afternoon, just finish below all our people if you don’t mind.”

“Anything for my eldest female American employee.” More giggling ensued.

Lunch was pretty good, the house elves were doing double time to make sure that everyone got fed. They weren’t the only ones wanting this longest of days to be over with. This and Saturday anyway, as all

the students in the four schools were invited to watch the Obstacle Course.

The second round of the Flying Challenge saw Marty move up four more spots, but be eliminated rather easily. He finished 48th, not quite in the top half, but a great result for someone so young. Harry and Jonas again skipped the round, and more and more whispers were going around about them, from the other players. Jonas knew a few of them from Quodpot camps and the like, and he introduced Harry to a number of his Junior National Team teammates. They all seemed like good guys, and they and the part of the gang that was there spent an enjoyable couple of hours between rounds talking about professional Quodpot and Quidditch. The drafts for each were the night before graduation, and Harry found out quite a bit about the AQA that he hadn't know about before. Nothing heinous or something to make him change his mind, but he decided right then that he would owl New York and tell them to tank their remaining two games and pick him and Warrick.

Though they were trying their hardest to do that already.

Claudia got there right as the Finals started, she had placed second in the History Trivial Pursuit competition. She said that Drew was on his way, and would tell them how he did.

He did so right a couple of people before Jonas was to go, and did so with a big smile.

"I won, and Liesel got second. All hail Tom Ripley and Dick Greenleaf." Marie was beaming too, standing with her arm around him, as Warrick explained.

"None of them came close either, not even Liesel, Drew was the man." Only Drew and Harry, of the gang, were entered in four events, and given that only 23 other Seniors and Juniors were also, that left a limited field for the overall, unless a three event person ran the table in their events.

“Jonas Steele!” He was up now, and after some hand slapping, got to the start line and mounted his broom.

“Ready.”

“Set.”

“GO!”

Jonas shot off, hugging the broom with his body, presenting the lowest possible wind profile as he quickly picked up speed. He at up the half mile to the stadium in seconds and turned even before he had the hoop, just getting a good enough grip on it to yank it off. He hugged the hoop to his body as he kept a hand and a half on the broom. He screamed over the finish line.

In first place.

STEELE, JONAS GL, 1:07.44

It was .99 seconds better than his Great Lakes time, mostly owing to a non-existent wind today. He was over a second better than John Collett of Pathfinder, and since the scores carried over, it was that much over the rest of the field as well.

“Sheesh, now I have to really try now don’t I?”

“Remember our bet buddy, I can’t wait to make you pay up.”

The bet for the rubber match between Harry and Jonas was that the winner got to decorate the game room in Charlottesville in their professional team’s colors for the rest of the calendar year. Harry didn’t care what the color scheme was, he just didn’t want Jonas to good-naturedly rub his nose in it. And he would.

The next girl up did not match Jonas’ time, or Collett’s for that matter, and Harry was now up. He had watched Jonas carefully during his two races, to see what that lift off maneuver was all about, and he

was determined to try it. He didn't have Jonas' leg strength, but all he needed to make up was .11 of a second.

"Ready."

"Set."

"GO!"

Harry shot off toward the stadium, faster than he had ever gone before, and at up the distance. He tried to let his magic flow through himself to the broom as the hoop that he had to get now came into his view. It got bigger and bigger as he got ready to grab it. He shifted his position when he was five seconds out, and snapped over in his swimming style flip turn, grabbing the hoop and cradling it in his left arm as he bent back down. His small profile helped him as he got a perfect angle to the finish line, which was only 10 feet high. He leaned as far forward as he could, and NOW!

He crossed the line and barely remembered to break before plowing into a crowd of people. He looked up at the scoreboard:

POTTER, HARRY GL 1:07.40

Oh my goodness, just four hundredths of a second between him and Jonas. One race apiece, even if Jonas had won the overall time. His friend was the first to congratulate him.

"Can't get much closer than that."

"I kind of wish we'd tried to be honest with you."

"Nah, someone had to win, congrats dude." They shook hands as the gang looked pleased about the one-two finish so far.

And that's how it would stay, as John Collett's earlier time held up, no one getting any closer than a second to them. Harry was the winner, with Jonas in second. Sally Jenkins would finish ninth, with our man Ray in 18th. The various professional scouts in attendance were full

of praise for the two winners, as their status as the number one picks in their drafts were pretty much secure. It turned out that Harry didn't have to ask the New York team to tank, as their main scout told him not to worry, he would be wearing green and white in less than a month.

“Um, sir, make that this time in August, hopefully. The English National Team Director asked me to work out with them.” The scout, Frank Wren, looked pleased to hear this.

“Even better, everything will be worked out Harry. We'll be in touch.”

The Great Lakes kids did not get an opportunity to explore Salem very much, the Lounges were just like their own in that you needed someone to invite you in. Jessica had invited them to drop by the next day, she would be competing on the last three days herself, but told them that there was very little difference. She herself had toured Hogwarts a couple of times as a little girl when her mother taught there, and she was looking forward to a conversation with Harry about it. He said that he would happily oblige, the further away from Hogwarts he was, the easier it was to talk about.

The Great Lakes people were back at school in time for dinner, and the non-Seniors regaled their classmates about their events and what little they had seen of the rival school. Great Lakes was in the lead after the first day, and there was a definite buzz in the air.

Standings after Day One:

Great Lakes: 805 points

Salem: 800 points

Pathfinder: 735 points

Tecumseh: 625 points

It was a tight race so far, but there was no telling what the next five days would bring. The host school was thought to have the

advantage, given their familiarity with the facilities and the environment, but the Great Lakes Seniors led the charge with a win for the day.

Tuesday, June 2, 1998

Salem Witches Institute

9:30 am

Today was the start of Reiko's Charms trifecta, along with special guest Jonas, as well as Warrick's only appearance as a competitor, with Sophie in Ancient Runes. Claudia was in Muggle Studies, hoping to rebound from what she termed as the event that got away. The others had told her that she was insane, second place against that field was nothing to be ashamed about, but she just waved them off. She knew that she had to run the table if she had any chance of winning, and since there was no Obstacle Course to slow her down.....well who knows. Drew and Harry were living the easy life today, along with Marie, and they would shuttle between events.

Reiko and Jonas breezed through the first round of Charms Animation, as the top 30 made the finals. They, along with the other hundreds of kids, found that these events were a lot easier when you did them for the second time in a month. There was hardly a student in any of the Finals of the events that didn't beat their lifetime best, though the more talented students found that to be especially so. One reason the Government's Education Department had been iffy about the resumption of the four school competition was that they worried that the teachers would do nothing but rehearse the events, neglecting the regular curriculum. This wasn't really the case in most of the classes, though Reducto was used more often this time of year than in the past, and dodging was always a heavy part of the Great Lakes lesson plans. It was a fine line really, and more than one teacher at the various schools crossed it on a daily basis. Reiko was even more determined to excel, since her mother was in the audience, the first time Lisa had seen her daughter compete at anything besides Quidditch. Lisa and Karl were alternating as chaperones for their students, and would each get to see their pride and joy doing the events in the subject that they taught.

Ancient Runes was not a full field event, no Novices and Freshmen, so it was a less crowded time for Warrick and Sophie. Warrick was probably the most tense of the lot today, since this was his only shot at glory during the week, and he did himself no favors by pressing. The second round was the top 24 of the 60 competitors, and Warrick ranked 24th, 11 spots behind Sophie, who was a bit nervous herself. Usually the only time that she was 'on stage' was in her own Olympics. She was still the shy Midwestern girl that she had always been, and still had a hard time fathoming how Harry could nonchalantly walk up to Heads of schools or of governments and just start chatting them up, and have them treat him as an equal no less.

Still, that's a big reason why the various rounds were there in the first place, to get some nerves out of the way, and Sophie got into the semi-finals just like she needed to be. So did Claudia for that matter, though she only qualified fourth, which made her more unhappy than they had ever seen her during Olympic week. They did their best to calm her down, but all she kept muttering about was how badly she was doing.

Warrick told Harry later on that the strain of no longer being the gang's leader was finally starting to make her crack. She had always been behind Sophie and Reiko academically, and Jonas and Warrick were the popular athletes, but she was their leader for three years. Then Harry came along, and soon thereafter Drew, the twins, and Marie, and things took a series of turns. She had lost her niche over the course of 21 months, she hadn't even been able to convince anyone to vote for her preferred school. It was about making a mark, and Claudia Jean Cregg saw this as her last chance to really make hers.

Lunch was spent with Jessica and her friends, as they had their Hogwarts talk. Sophie probably said more than Harry, telling them all what it was like to walk the halls as a stranger, not as an 11 year old trying to figure out where to go for class. Sophie had met Peeves, who Jessica remembered fondly, while Peeves wasn't exactly nice to either of them, he didn't insult them.

With Sophie that might have had to do with Harry standing behind his girlfriend, drawing a finger across his throat in a gesture that Peeves fully understood. With Jessica, Peeves just happened to be intrigued by Americans, and harassed her mother barely at all.

The biggest shocker was when one of Jessica's classmates, she was a Transition this year, inquired about whether or not Hogwarts took transfers.

"Wow, that wasn't something I'd figured on hearing. All I can tell you, is that we never had one when I was there, though I wasn't the first to transfer out. Do you want me to find out for you?"

"Yes please, if it's not too much trouble."

"Not much trouble at all if you've got a pen and a piece of paper handy." She did, and he scribbled a note down quickly. The girls, as they all were, were somewhat amazed at the fast action going on here.

"Dobby!"

"Yes Harry."

"Please take this to Remus, and wait for a reply."

"Of course Harry."

The Hogwarts folk were at dinner, so The Headmaster was easy to find. The question surprised him a bit, but he took the proffered pen and answered it.

The answer read:

"We take transfers, like most schools do, on a case by case basis. Our unofficial policy is that there must be some compelling reason why the student can't go back to his or her original or designated school. I hope this answers your friend's question. Take care Harry.

Moony

The girl, Lisa Sillers, looked a little crestfallen. She had read Hogwarts a History more than a couple of times and had built up a kind of fantasy view of it. She quietly resolved to make a try for it anyway, but thanked Harry sincerely for his efforts.

“Not a problem Lisa, and if I can be of any help there, just have Jessica let me know.”

Lisa thanked him sincerely, she didn't move away though, yet, and Harry was drawn into more Hogwarts stories, and what the castle was like. It was a fun couple of hours, and only broke off because people had to start getting to their events.

Claudia would rally to finish second again in her Muggle Studies event, giving her 40 points so far, as well as the lead in the overall. She was feeling a little better about everything with that finish, and wasn't quite as irritable as she was earlier in the day. She still bore watching though, and Harry and Sophie in particular made a vow to each other to keep an eye on her.

Harry, for his own part, felt he was finally beginning to understand some of the Runes that were in the Survivor style hunt that was this event. He had idly paged through Sophie's textbook, for the first time in a long time, and it was actually starting to make a tiny bit of sense. For the finals he had Warrick to explain it to him again, as his roommate finished 20th overall in his second best subject, not making the final 10 that qualified for the finals. Sophie did however, moving up to ninth after the second round, clinching points in both her year and the overall.

Reiko and Jonas did not have a second round, and they spent their time doing what the organizers were hoping all the kids would do: Getting to know students from other schools. Reiko had a leg up already in that area, knowing a lot of the Tecumseh kids already. Steve Atwood, who had finished 32nd in the History event the day before, had qualified in this event too, and he took the opportunity to get some sales for Jessica and Sarah, telling them all about his favorite WWW products. Steve was the center of attention for another

reason: He was the only magical this year to get a perfect score on his SAT's, giving him the probable free ride to any school in the country that he wanted.

The Seniors all tended to bond during these things, trading college choices and apprehensions about NEWT's, which were two weeks away. None of the Charms people were going to Virginia, though a few knew some that were, but Reiko and Jonas found out a lot more about some of the other schools that they had considered, all the while the final round was progressing in the rooms next to them. For her part, Lisa didn't hover, she knew that with the trunks in Charlottesville she could see a lot more of her daughter than in any recent year. She and Professor Westin struck up a long conversation, some of it about Reiko and her friends, and a friendship was ignited. Again, part of the whole point.

In Ancient Runes there was something of an upset in the final, as Pathfinder Transition student Emilio Flores snagged the overall title, he would be the only Transition student to win a non-Astronomy event all week. Sophie had finally found her relaxation point it seemed, and finished a solid fifth. Pretty good considering that she had been seeded between 21st and 24th, and she was the second highest Great Lakes person, behind her Cortez Housemate Katherine Matheson, who finished third. Harry was pleased as anything for Sophie, and he and Warrick led her out of the room on a conjured up throne that they had created. She had scored 17 points, and her best event wasn't until the next day. Sophie was a bit mortified about the throne though, and leapt off it after just a few steps outside the door. She said that fifth didn't deserve that, but wait until she whupped her man at the Dodge-a-thon the next day.

They hurried over to Charms, only to find out that they had just missed Jonas' go round, and a solid go round it was too, putting him in second place with 11 students to go. Enough did not pass him that he wound up 10th, a more than solid placement that had both Elizabeth Westin and Lisa Aylesworth beaming for their student/friend. Reiko was seeded next to last, and beat her Great Lakes score by more than 20 percent, taking the lead with one person to go. Her score of 345 points shattered the Great Lakes record, and was 39

points ahead of the next highest score. There was just one person to go.

And that one person was Carlos Twin Bear, a half Mexican/half Native American who was the pride and joy of the Tecumseh Charms program. A program run by Karl and Lisa Aylesworth. Lisa was torn here a little bit, but Reiko just smirked.

“Go ahead Mom, cheer the guy on. He’s not going to animate an extra object just because you’re on pins and needles.” Carlos was not a student who stayed over at Christmas, so while Reiko had heard all about him, the two had never met.

Carlos was great, no doubts there, but he was not up to Reiko, at least not in this event. He scored 322 points, getting a somewhat decisive second place finish, and Reiko was the champion. After a cordial handshake with Twin Bear, she was enveloped in a fierce hug by her mother.

“I’m so proud of you baby, so proud.”

“Thanks Mom, I suppose you and Dad were just a tiny bit of an influence on me.” She was very pleased though.

“I’m glad we were. I’m going to make sure that we hire someone old to take my place, so that you can take over after you graduate from college.” Lisa had gotten her promotion to Deputy Headmistress, and already the head hunting was going on to replace her.

“I’m going to hold you to that Mom, I’m really glad you were here to see it today.”

“Me too baby, me too.”

The Standings after Day Two:

Salem: 450 points for the day, 1250 points for the week

Great Lakes: 410 points for the day, 1215 points for the week

Pathfinder: 375 points for the day, 1110 points for the week

Tecumseh: 361 points for the day, 986 points for the week

Wednesday, June 3, 1998

Salem Witches Institute

9:30 am

The gang was heading for the school after their portkey ride, when Harry spotted Pathfinder Headmaster James Morrison. He figured that this would be the man to see about his question. He hurried over and got his attention.

“Hey James.....err, Headmaster Morrison.” They knew each other from the School Commission, a meeting of which would be held tomorrow, deliberately on a day that Harry was idle. The kids around him laughed at the err part, and Morrison was smiling too.

“Hello there Harry, good luck today.” He hadn’t minded the informality at all.

“Thank you sir. I was wondering if you could point out Sarah Hoerauf for me. I’d just as soon not run around shouting her name.”

“That’s right, she mentioned that she’s not actually met you. It’s the brown haired girl over there, with the blue ribbon in her hair.”

“Thanks Headmaster, much appreciated.” He walked over to her, she hadn’t noticed her Headmaster getting queried.

“Sarah?” He got a wide smile in return.

“I’ll bet a swamp that you’re Harry Potter.”

“Yes I am, nice to finally meet you.” They shook hands, and Harry was introduced to her friends. Sarah was one of Harry’s opponents

today, as she was in the Dodge-a-thon, having won her year at the Pathfinder Olympics, held just hours after Harry's own win.

"Nice to meet my second cousin's husband's client." Everyone had a sense of humor it seemed, and the Pathfinder kids had all taken a lot of pleasure in how Sarah had been hired for her job.

"I know, we're practically brother and sister."

They spent the walk over to the Defense area getting to know each other, soon joined by Sophie and the rest of the gang. Harry, Sophie, and Reiko would be the only ones competing, and Reiko didn't have to go until the afternoon for the Charms Marathon.

Anna Kessler was the star of the early rounds, as she led for a long time until Tecumseh Apprentice Shawn Pickett took the lead. He held it for most of the round, until Sophie got in the square.

She did her Harry-style juking and such, and given that she was fourth from the last, as soon as they announced that she had passed Pickett, she allowed herself to be taken down. She made the end look pretty good, but anyone closely watching knew what really happened. Her lead held up until Harry's turn, and he had a request for his friend Raymond Parker, who was the official event monitor.

"Let me know five seconds before I get to Sophie's time."

"Sure thing Harry."

Harry had little trouble getting that far, and when Raymond called out the required time, Harry went down after barely being grazed. He got some surprised looks from those who had heard about his dodging abilities. Once they were on their way to lunch, Sophie just looked at him with exasperation.

"Now just why did you do that?"

"I wanted you to be leading after a round. I'm going to try to win the event at the end, but I wanted you to know what it felt like to lead."

That touched her a lot, and she had to fight off a tear or two as they entered the Dining Hall, their first time actually getting a table in it.

Sophie, in all her years in the Olympics, had never actually won her year in anything, despite being third in the class now and always in the top five. She was very good to great in everything she did, but did not have that one outstanding subject, like Reiko with Charms or Harry and Drew in Defense, or even Claudia in History. In a way it was easier to be Marie, who was content with being good in everything. Of course Marie's family was richer than Harry, and she was the only child, that surely had something to do it. Not every rich kid had Harry's drive.

But Sophie was one of those on the cusp of greatness, able to see it, recognize it, and fully appreciate it. But not actually achieve it. At least not yet.

To her credit, she was fully aware of this, and likened the situation to the math professor in Good Will Hunting, which they'd seen over Christmas break. She saw in the movie how frustrated he was at the protagonist not striving to live up to his potential, to do things that the professor could not quite do himself. Sophie didn't have that problem, not with Reiko, Harry, and Drew around, but she, like Claudia, was still waiting for something that she could make her mark in.

Lunch was spent with Sarah Hoerauf and a couple of her friends that were doing other events today. They went over some of the things WWW was going to be rolling out, and what Sarah's summer plans were. This was nothing that could not be done via Dobby, but Harry liked the fact that he now knew all of the main WWW employees. He would retain a small role in the business over the next year, or that was the plan anyway, with Rachel Kessler being the overall American manager for WWW. Steve Atwood had his successor ready to go, and from the previous conversations with Jessica, she did too. Harry found that talking about the business relaxed him, and with the rest of this week, one more Quidditch game, then NEWT's.....well he needed all the relaxation he could get.

The second round went a lot quicker than the first one did, as the top 15 students all sat it out, as the field was winnowed to the final 25 competitors. Reiko had to leave just as the round was ending early, as she was up in the Charms Marathon. Warrick went with her, even though he couldn't actually watch her do it, but he felt that his presence would bring her good fortune anyway.

And he was right.

Reiko went among the last group, Karl waiting with Warrick outside in the hallway. The event was the exact same as the Great Lakes one, so it was the list of spells that she had done before, starting with Wingardium Leviosa and ending with the Patronus, with 58 other beauties in between.

Karl and Warrick began by just chatting, that awkward kind of chatter between a father and his daughter's boyfriend, especially when the two don't see each other on a semi-regular basis. It evolved into wedding plans for an engagement that was not yet official, meaning the bending of the knee. They agreed that it would be in Bloomington, Indiana, the ceremony, which was the home base for the both sides of Warrick's family, and a lot of other details as well, though they agreed that Reiko would get what she wanted in every detail.

They didn't start pacing until the 40 minute mark, though Warrick time after time reminded them both that Reiko had gone an hour the last time. He volunteered to get an Extendable Ear from Harry, but Karl immediately vetoed that idea, he didn't even want to slightly risk something that might get Reiko disqualified.

The 50 minute mark came, and that was the second place time from the Great Lakes Olympics, posted by Eric Liddell, who would go 54 minutes today. That really got the two men agitated, as Marty came up to them.

"She ain't done yet?"

"Nope, 50 minutes down."

“Great things come in small packages.”

Karl smiled at that, he liked Marty. Karl was barely 5’8” himself, Lisa being four inches smaller, so Reiko’s 5’2” height was not much of a surprise.

55 minutes now, and they could barely stand it. Marty was getting edgy already and he had barely been there five minutes. He did have an Extendable Ear on him, for reasons no one really wanted to know, and he was almost at the door when Karl noticed and managed to stop him, Marty wasn’t too big on asking permission to do things.

The hour mark hit, and the other monitors started to come over. They wouldn’t say what the times were, feeling that the competitors should know before anyone else. Eric soon joined them, exhausted but satisfied as he told them how he did. His jaw didn’t so much as flinch, let alone drop, as they told him how Reiko was doing, he just looked pleased for his classmate.

Then the door opened, and Pathfinder Charms teacher Stuart Craig came out.

“Time for Reiko Aylesworth of Great Lakes, 61 minutes.” He compared notes with the other monitors, and declared:

“Reiko Aylesworth is the winner of the Charms Marathon, followed by Sue Townsend of Pathfinder at 56 minutes and Eric Liddell of Great Lakes at 54 minutes.” Eric had narrowed the gap some, but it wasn’t enough. For reference purposes, Harry had gone 74 minutes the week before, in front of only Professors Maloney and Westin, and Sophie. Only the four of them would be privy to the score unless one of the others flat out guessed that he had tried it and asked for the results.

Warrick and company rushed into the room to find a dazed but grinning Reiko sitting on a chair. She had heard that she had won, but was too tired to be jumping up and down about it.

“Congratulations daughter of mine, that was pretty impressive, I only wish I could have seen it up close.”

“Thanks Daddy. I really don’t want to move right now, but I want to see how Sophie and Harry are doing in the dodging.”

Karl did the honors, and levitated his daughter out of her chair and over to the Defense area, where the Dodge-a-thon was taking place.

Karen Yeo of Great Lakes, 10th in the prelims, had just taken the lead. The rest of the gang let out a big cheer about Reiko, fortunately before the ninth place girl had started her final run. She was now the only one, at least for the next 20 minutes or so, with two victories in the week so far, as a lot of winner of their school events were having to come to grips with second, third, or worse finishes in the overall. In other words there were a lot of Claudias running around this week. Karen’s time held up for two more people, before being overtaken by Steve Atwood’s WWW assistant, Paul Shirley, far and away the tallest person in the competition at 5’11, he nonetheless was very athletic and a good dodger. Sally Jenkins went right after him, but failed to overtake him, she would finish ninth, right behind Karen.

Anna Kessler, fifth after the first round, defended her position, and was now the leader with just four to go. The next two passed her with better times than anyone in the previous rounds, so Harry and Sophie would have to work for their high placements. The lead score was now 3:40.92.

Harry was first, and his first few minutes were a typical Harry performance of near misses, glancing blows, and a direct hit that hit him on the ear. It didn’t knock him down, but it made the next minutes unpleasant. He passed three minutes, then four as he took the lead, and seemed hell bent on ten minutes before both shooters placed shots perfectly and knocked him down at 5:43.67. It was well below his Great Lakes winning time, but over two minutes better than the next highest score. Sophie wasn’t going to beat that, but the second place time was in reach, as Harry told her on her way to the square.

“Look, don’t worry about my time, just stay within yourself and let things flow. Be smooth and steady, and you’ll take it home.” He meant take second place home, even Harry didn’t think Sophie could get close to five minutes.

She got in the square and signaled that she was ready. The two teachers, one from Pathfinder and one from Salem, started firing at her. Ripley had made a point of ensuring that Burke and Hill from Tecumseh did not fire at either Harry or Sophie, he had watched the two very closely so far today for potential bias.

Sophie cruised through the first two minutes, and then started having some issues. She was hit about once every five seconds for the next minute, and smooth and steady was soon a thing of the past. She made it just past three minutes when a pair of shots hit her on the left shoulder, and her last palm almost touched the floor when she managed to jerk it up at the last possible nanosecond, the floor was charmed to show if someone had both knees and both hands on the floor. Ripley soon called out three and a half minutes, and Sophie mentally breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that she was about to be home.

And she was, finally falling down at 3:48.21, more than 14 seconds better than her Great Lakes time.

“And the winner of the Dodge-a-thon, Harry Potter of Great Lakes! Second place goes to Sophie Weir of Great Lakes, and third to Dov Barak of Tecumseh.” Barak was Tecumseh’s best Quidditch player, and would play Seeker for Israel in the coming World Cup.

Harry lifted Sophie to her feet and hugged her.

“You did great honey, I’m so proud of you.”

“I am the Girl Who Snagged The Boy Who Lived, I had to do well at something here you know.” She was laughing, though tiredly, when she said it.

“Oh be quiet would you. I love you.”

“I love you too, just don’t make me move right now.”

“I know the feeling, I’m not sure I could Apparate now even if I had to, or do any fighting.”

“Don’t worry, you can destroy things in a couple of days.”

Standings after Day Three:

Salem: 575 points for the day, 1825 points for the week

Great Lakes: 596 points for the day, 1811 points for the week

Pathfinder: 463 points for the day, 1573 points for the week

Tecumseh: 524 points for the day, 1510 points for the week

Thursday, June 4, 1998

Salem Witches Institute

9:30 am

Reiko and Drew were the only ones going today with wands, in the last Charms event, the Air Apparent, while Marie and Joe Clancy would spend all day in Potions, in the Shrinking Event. Reiko, having won both of the Charms events so far, was the heavy favorite in the unofficial polls going on, with Drew seemingly assigned to play runner-up the rest of the week, according to the buzz index. Harry would be occupied most of the morning with his last School Defense Commission Meeting, or least he thought that it would be his last.

The Charms Air Apparent was Jessica Murray’s first event of the week, she would be doing the Reducto Challenge and the Obstacle Course as well, and there was a LOT of interest from Great Lakes students as to what the daughter of their Headmistress was capable of magically. Jessica was currently the only child of a Head of school

still in the system, all others had graduated by now, and she was always under a little more scrutiny than most.

The first round seemingly flew by, with Drew leading the round and Reiko resting a bit, finishing eighth. Drew had not quite gone all out, but even at 90 percent he was still in the lead. It was tough to say though, as no one could really tell if another school's student was sandbagging.

At the end of his two hour School Defense meeting, Harry was approached by Mike Jacobson and his Deputy Head Auror, Dean Pepper. Jacobson spoke first.

"Harry, if you have the time, I would like you to remain on the Commission as a regular member. We'll appoint another student to take your place there, but we'd like you to stay on if you can. I know you have college and Quidditch, but one meeting every six weeks, which is what it's going to be, shouldn't be too taxing if you're willing."

"That's unexpected, I was figuring that this would be my last one. Of course I'll stay, if you feel I would be valuable."

"You are, and I do. Do you have a recommendation for your replacement? I don't think anyone would mind if it was another Great Lakes person, given how the exercises went." All three of them smiled.

"I do, I was hoping you would ask. Her name is Rachel Kessler, she's a Junior right now at Great Lakes and is our American manager for WWW. She's in Basic Combat and has a very creative mind. I think she would do nicely." Rachel wasn't there this day, but Jacobson was already nodding.

"I know her father pretty well, he's a member of Congress, so that will work politically as well. Tell her that the next meeting will be our Summer session, sometime in late July, I'll let you know the details before the month is out."

“Great, she’ll be really pleased.” And she would be, Rachel was hoping to follow in her father’s footsteps and go into magical politics, and this would be a great way to start for her.

Harry excused himself and met the others for lunch, hearing in detail about the workings of the first round. Marie and Joe hadn’t gone yet, and while they were getting along, it took one look from an unforgiving Warrick to make sure that Clancy did not join them for the meal. Harry told them about remaining on the Commission, and everyone agreed that it was worth it just for the inside information he would be getting. Drew’s mother joined them part way through the meal, she had been there for the meeting, and echoed their opinions on it. She was the clear front runner for the Presidency, less than six months before the election, and she already had roles in mind for Reiko, Sophie, and Warrick, who had already volunteered to be of some summer help to her. There would be no Ministry training program this summer, for them anyway.

The final round of the Charms event was delayed a little bit by a Salem Apprentice who did very poorly and proceeded to wig out, throwing curses right and left. Not at people mind you, he just wanted to destroy some things in his frustration. It was quite a sight, and it took three of his teachers to calm him down. He was hustled to Dr. Carter in the basement and force fed a sedative, finally calming him down, though he did try to fight the drugs.

Reiko threw up a 529 score, the first time all week she didn’t improve on her Great Lakes score, the Marathon the day before had tuckered her out a bit more than she had thought it would, but she consoled herself with the idea that she had left nothing on the floor, energy-wise, and that score would have to do. It was still better than she had done last year, with a somewhat easier overall schedule then.

And it did hold up for the next few competitors, including her classmate Jack Straw, who moved into second place behind her. There were two people left, Carlos Twin Bear, and Drew. Carlos went first, and had Reiko nervous for awhile before all six of his objects dropped at the same time. Lisa again looked conflicted, as her top student, who had finished sixth in the Charms Marathon, again failed to beat her daughter. Twin Bear would ace his NEWT’s, which would

make Lisa feel a little better about things as she made the transition from teaching to administration.

Now there was only Drew, who was slightly distracted at the start by Marie coming in. She held up two fingers, signally that she and Joe had finished second. Drew grinned at her, and then put his mind back on his task at hand.

And boy did he ever. He got five objects up right away, a lot quicker than Reiko did, and held them up for quite the long while. Wandless magic was not allowed in this event, since it would unfairly help the Juniors and Seniors, so each competitor was required to have their non-wand hand, in this case Drew's right, behind their back in plain sight. That's the only thing that stopped people from thinking that he was using both, because those five objects stayed up for almost nine minutes. His final score was an insane 589 points, far and away an American record for this event. It was 45 points better than Harry had done in his secret trial of the event the year before, and it took every ounce of magic Drew had. He collapsed on the floor just a couple of seconds after his last object did, to the hushed awe of the spectators. Harry and Marie got him to his feet and raised his arms in victory. He smiled faintly, and Reiko just came up and hugged him.

"Marathon yesterday or not, there's no way I could have topped that. That was amazing Drew, congratulations." The rest of the gang thought similarly, and Maloney slipped Drew some Pepper-Up Potion, so that Harry and Marie could stop holding him up. Drew looked at his girlfriend.

"That took a long time."

"Sorry I couldn't match your win, but second for me and first for you, that's not a bad day."

"I would have preferred it the other way around if I had a choice, but since I didn't, I'll take this." Drew, Harry, and Reiko all had two wins apiece, along with two other competitors from other schools. The last four events would be very interesting.

Standings after Day Four:

Great Lakes: 475 points for the day, 2286 points for the week

Salem: 456 points for the day, 2281 points for the week

Pathfinder: 412 points for the day, 1985 points for the week

Tecumseh: 367 points for the day, 1877 points for the week

Friday, June 5, 1998

Salem Witches Institute

9:30 am

This was the most anticipated day of the competition so far, if for no other reason than a lot of non-Great Lakes students would get to see Harry attack something, even if it was only a stone. Harry and Drew highlighted the Reducto Challenge, while Claudia had her last shot at victory in the History by the Book event. Sophie would tackle the Transfiguration Build Upon, while Reiko would enjoy her soon to be short lived lead.

The first round of Reducto was pretty boring on the whole, as none of the Novices wanted to finish last or out of the points. Marty again excelled at this one, taking a rather shorter lead than before though, and losing it late in the Freshman round. Marty would finish 67th overall, and not come anywhere near the finals. He won his year though, and after a sixth place finish in the Charms Marathon on Wednesday, would finish his week with a terrific score of 30 points, which would give him the Novice title, though that would not be decided until the following day.

Drew and Harry went toward the end of the Seniors, as usual, and put up scores of five shots each, with Harry as usual being a little bit faster on the draw and on his shot rate. They were one-two after the first round, and would skip the second round later on, a decision made before they knew if anyone had topped their scores. And no one did.

Meanwhile Claudia and Sophie were kicking tail in their last events of the week, Claudia yet again winning the multiple choice portion of the History by the Book event, and Sophie cruising into the finals of the Build Upon event in seventh place. Jack Straw, the Transfiguration whiz kid of Great Lakes, was in first place. The Great Lakes Seniors, so dominant in their own Olympics, were keeping that up here as well. And not just the gang too, Straw had won the Transfiguration Marathon on Wednesday, and Miguel Alvarez swept the Arithmancy events, despite losing one of them at the Great Lakes competition. Where Salem was keeping up was in the Freshman, Sophomore, and Apprentice Years, where they were particularly strong and Great Lakes not so much.

The last round of the Reducto Challenge began at just after 3:00 pm, right after a beyond ecstatic Claudia strolled in with a first place swinging from her belt. Literally, she had the trophy almost stuffed into her oversized pocket, just shrunk enough. Sophie was still ongoing, and Harry had Dobby monitoring that event, though Reiko and Warrick were there to watch her.

They watched Sophie do a bathroom this time, that was the specified area to be done in the Build Upon, and she did well enough to be bumped up a couple of slots, and finish fifth. The three of them stuck around, wanting to cheer on Jack, figuring that Harry and Drew would win the Reducto no matter who was watching them.

Jack would wind up winning the event, making him the fifth Great Lakes Senior to win a pair of them, with Claudia close behind with a win and two second place finishes. The lot of them trooped over to Reducto in time to see Jessica Murray need seven shots to break the stone, putting her in first place with 11 competitors to go. Jessica had won her year in the Charms Air Apparent the day before, and was already the Transition winner here too. A win in the Transition Obstacle Course would give her the overall in her year, a second place would probably do the job as well.

The Reducto Challenge goes very quickly, as the stone is easy to repair and the actual firing takes mere seconds. So just 10 minutes after Jessica finished, Drew was called up.

He gave the nod to Raymond Parker, and prepared to let loose.

“REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO!”

It was as fast as he had ever done, though we're talking hundredths of a seconds difference. His four shots were the least so far, and his time was best too, putting him in first place. Only Harry could screw this up for him, and that's just what he did.

Harry took a long, relatively speaking, time to set himself, and when he did, the speed and magic just flowed out of him:

“REDUCTO! REDUCTO! REDUCTO!”

The third shot was just enough to get to the center, and put a lot more powder on the ground than Drew did as well. No one had ever needed just three shots to do it, and that included Aurors at the American Academy or Commonwealth type Aurors at the Isle of Man. As Marty had said two days earlier, good things do come in small packages, and Harry as the smallest Senior male in the competition, in any event this week. Didn't matter though, as Raymond announced the winners:

“And the winner is Harry Potter of Great Lakes, followed by Drew Baylor of Great Lakes and Dennis Lynch of Pathfinder.” Harry and Drew took their fifth one-two finish in their brief Olympic history together, always in that order unfortunately for Drew. He would have one last chance at Harry the next day in the Obstacle Course, and his Charms title meant that he still had a chance at the overall title as well. He just had to beat Harry for the first time is all. Nothing too hard.

Standings after Day Five:

Great Lakes: 380 points for the day, 2666 points for the week

Salem: 382 points for the day, 2663 points for the week

Pathfinder: 300 points for the day, 2285 points for the week

Tecumseh: 306 points for the day, 2183 points for the week

Saturday, June 6, 1998

Salem Witches Institute

9:00 am

The end of days, as students had taken to calling it. The full field of 84 gathered in the Dining Hall for some final instructions. Salem Defense teacher Raymond Parker, who in a few weeks would inherit the Senior position from his retiring colleague, took the floor.

“Now this is not your normal obstacle course, though it might seem like it. There are eight obstacles in it, but some will seem familiar. There will be two obstacles from each school’s own course last month, so a quarter of the course will be familiar to you. This is the event that we’ve spent the most time and planning on, and will be a good test of your Defense skills, as well as your quick thinking and logical abilities. The one thing we’ll be doing differently this time is that the order will go by year, not overall points. Within your year, it will still be least points to most, but that’s all. So Renee Appleby and Stuart Wooding will go first, and Drew Baylor and Harry Potter will go last. Juniors and Seniors, it’s going to be awhile til we get to you, so do what you have to do to make things comfortable for yourselves in here, lunch will be gotten to you at noon or thereabouts. Any questions? Okay then, I need the first six Novices to come with me now.” He read off a list of names, Keisha and Anna, one-two in the Great Lakes event for their year, would go in the next heat.

Drew, Harry, and our man Ray took a table and debated on whether or not to screw around or do some NEWT work. The tests started a week from Monday, and all three of them felt that they needed a lot more revision, especially since Ray and Harry had Quidditch games a week from today. Drew found the compromise.

“Let’s study until lunch, then we can relax a little and get ready for our round.” Everyone agreed that this sounded like a plan, so Dobby

was sent back to Great Lakes to get their books. Ray and Harry focused on their weak spots of Transfiguration, while Drew did a little bit of everything. Other Seniors and Transitions were doing the same, and soon everyone in the room was being quiet and doing some productive, even those without OWL's and NEWT's coming up. Every 45 minutes or so, six students would be taken out as the next group. There would be 14 in all, and the Great Lakes contingent would be in the last one, Ray currently sitting sixth of the Obstacle Course competing Seniors in the overall points, 14th overall.

Jessica joined them for lunch, and talk quickly turned to WWW and the future of the business. She surprised them by telling Harry that she had already taken on a Freshman as her gofer, paying the girl relatively little, but acclimating her to the products and what they were like. Jessica still had two years left in school, but said that you could never plan too far ahead for these things. Besides, she had OWL's coming up, and needed to delegate a little bit.

Ray himself, always our man, was heading to Georgetown for college, along with his roommate and best friend Jack Straw, and plans were hatched to do some socializing once everyone settled into their situations, the two schools not being that far apart distance-wise. Harry and company actually had a room available at the houses, but Jack and Ray had already sorted that out. Most of the 'do nothing' time was actually spent planning the gang's last prank, one for the ages as Harry called it, to take place after the last NEWT was over, and right after the Quodpot draft that was to take place the night before graduation. All depended on how wiped out the gang and its auxiliaries would be after their tests.

Soon 4:30 pm rolled around, Jessica having long since departed to compete, and Beau Shupe himself came into the now empty Dining Hall. Well, almost empty.

"We're ready for you guys, let's get going."

Harry, Ray, Drew, and three girls spread out over as many tables got up and went with Shupe. Harry and Shupe lightly conversed over the mile walk to the stadium, but mostly there was little talking. They went into the standard trailer that was outside the stadium for this kind of

thing, and were told to wait. It was another 10 minutes, and the last of the previous group leaving, before Ray was told that he was up. He left without a word, and they could soon hear the crowd cheering as Ray started.

Harry sat in his chair and did some Occlumency exercises, mostly to keep calm, but also to avoid the stares of the rest of the trailer, not Drew, which he found to be a little off putting. He knew that he had to win the event to clinch the overall, anything less and it opened up things for Drew to tie him or beat him, and Harry never thought for one minute that Drew wouldn't beat everyone else.

One by one the girls left, and finally it was Drew's turn. He and Harry shared a long look, shook hands, and he was off. Harry put a Muffling Charm around his head, he didn't want to hear the crowd cheering. He wanted his friend to do well of course, but the competitor in Harry wanted nothing to get in the way of his win. In competitions that truly counted, Harry had lost one beyond tainted Quidditch game, another tainted Tri-Wizard Tournament, which he did count as a Cedric victory, and a legit loss to Jonas the month before. He wanted to keep it that way. He just replaying this mantra over and over in his head until Ripley came to get him.

"Harry, it's time."

He left with his teacher, and soon they got the start/finish line. The crowd was hoarse, but loud, and none of them spoiled anything for Harry, as the course and the scoreboard were Disillusioned, the course until the word 'go', and the scoreboard until he finished. Ripley gave him the customary spiel, and then waited for Raymond Parker to signal.

"Ready."

"Set."

"GO!"

Harry sprinted off as the course appeared in his vision. He knew to expect two familiar obstacles, and the very first one was the same fence from Great Lakes. He put down his Rebounding Charm as before, grabbed the top of the fence and vaulted over into the swamp. He vaulted a bit far though, not on purpose really, and landed with his left foot on a rock. A hard rock.

And the impact tore his Anterior Cruciate Ligament.

Harry had blown out his knee, and the magical microphones around the field was so sensitive that those in the crowd heard the 'pop' as his ligament shredded. They went dead quiet, with Sophie's face turning sheer white, as the microphones also picked up Harry's semi-loud grunt of both pain and surprise.

This was pain as Harry had only felt under Cruiciatus, later on he would agree that the name for the ligament was very, very appropriate. Still, he had a race to win, and pointed his wand at the knee.

"Mediculo Reparo!" This was a Repairing Charm specifically designed for human body parts. It wasn't as long-term effective as Dr. Carter's potions, but it would get him through the rest of the event. Still, he had lost a few valuable seconds though, and he punted himself out of the swamp and headed on, to the astonishment of the crowd.

His knee still hurt like crazy, but it functioned as well as if it were healthy. He ran ahead and saw the next obstacle.

It was a mid-sized dragon, and Harry actually almost stopped to ask how a Novice was supposed to get past a dragon. Then the dragon blew it's fire, and it was a blast of ice, not fire. Somehow they, this came from Salem, had manipulated something in the dragon to get it that way. Harry took no chances and loosed a Petrificus Totalus right at the dragon's right eyeball. It hit home just perfectly, and he planted another PT in the left eyeball. The dragon's eyes were frozen open, and she did not like that one bit. But the upside is that she couldn't see Harry, and he ran under the dragon's legs and on to the next obstacle, praying that he had satisfied the judges.

He had, he had forgotten that the rules said that the judges would stop any competitor that did not sufficiently deal with an obstacle and make he/she go back and do it again, all the while on the clock. This had tripped up many a younger student in this event, and even a few older ones.

The next obstacle was a set of swinging spikes, not unlike those he had faced last year in the Obstacle Course. This was from Burke and Hill, our Tecumseh buddies, who had used it in their Olympics this year, not knowing about Great Lakes familiarity with it. Harry took a chance and loosed a curse at them.

“ABRUMPERE!”

It broke off one of the spikes, and Harry, perhaps out of frustration with his hurt knee, poured Explosion Curse fire into the spikes, seven curses in all, and turned them into powder. He ran on to the next one, his knee hurting a little more with every meter he ran, though it seemed that it would withstand planting it.

The next obstacle was a wall of fire, courtesy of Pathfinder and Harry turned a fire hose spell on it.

Which did absolutely nothing, it didn't even make steam, the water just passed right through it. So Harry decided to do the same thing, he ran right through the flames, not knowing how deep they were.

Not a bad move, since the flames were nothing more than an illusion. Most had tried more than one spell on the flames, and Harry had made up a little of his knee problem time back. The crowd was back to cheering like crazy by now, and Sophie was now looking without her hands in front of her eyes. Anna Kessler, sitting in front of her, had been totally flummoxed by the pseudo fire, and thus lost the Novice title to her not yet boyfriend Marty.

Next up was another magical creature, a conjured up spider, another Salem creation. A very, very large spider that would have sent Hagrid into spasms of joy and Ron running for the nearest portkey. Harry just ran right at it and again used his new favorite curse:

“ABRUMPERE!”

This spider was armored in certain places and it just absorbed the Explosion Curse with nothing more than a flinch. Harry then tried Incendio, which just made the thing mad until Harry walked the fire, literally, into the spider's face. Even then it took 12 precious seconds of both Harry's wand and hand to do the job and eliminate the spider.

Only three more to go, as a now weakened Harry ran toward a large boulder. It was 20 meters away, and Harry spent a couple of seconds debating on whether to explode it or just throw it out of the way, when the boulder exploded without him doing anything, other than stepping on a pressure sensor hidden in the ground. The pieces of rock formed a whirlwind of sorts, and Harry had to start blasting his way through, mostly with Repulsar since he was tired and just had to get through them, rather than get rid of them. It was a Henry Hill creation, proving that while he wasn't much of a strategist, he could build things.

He pulsed his way into a clear path, and headed for obstacle number seven.

It was the magical version of muggle skeet shooting. He had to hit five launched discs before the magical barrier would allow him to pass. He did this all the time as stress relief, so he zapped off five straight hits, and ran forward.

The final obstacle of Harry's school career was his favorite blue mist, and he stopped to answer it's question.

“What was the last school to win the four school Olympics?” A bit of trivia that the answer of which was not a point of pride among the other three schools.

“Salem.”

The mist formed a hand and yanked Harry through it, and planted him in the Devil's Snare. Before he even landed he had his hand firing

Incendio, which hardened his landing a bit, but got him a jump start on getting out. His wand soon helped, and Harry ran through the plant wreckage and on to the finish line. He managed to do it without too bad of a limp, and actually felt good about it as he crossed the line. He looked up at the scoreboard.

BAYLOR, DREW, GL: 3:35.45

POTTER, HARRY, GL: 3:36.12

The crowd was initially torn between being quiet and cheering, but settled on cheering as Harry fell to the ground, holding his leg. He had finished second in the event with a torn up knee. Drew came over, Dr. Carter hot on his trail, and helped Harry up as Raymond Parker announced the winners:

“And the winner of the Obstacle Course: Drew Baylor of Great Lakes! He’s followed by Harry Potter of Great Lakes and Iwanko Nagula of Salem.” He paused for breath, and then:

“And the winners of the overall title, in a tie, are Harry Potter and Drew Baylor of Great Lakes. Each of them had three wins and a second place, with the second place coming to each other. Congratulations Harry and Drew.” He looked over at Shupe and Murray, who were comparing notes. They brought the notes over, and Parker read from them.

“Great Lakes wins the school competition with a score of 2783 points! Salem is second with 2767 points, then Pathfinder with 2445 points and Tecumseh scoring 2242 points.”

The Great Lakes part of the crowd was going nuts, as Harry raised Drew’s arm in victory, followed by vice versa. Carter slipped Harry some pain potion vials, and he limped off with Drew, heading to the Great Lakes section.

“That was great Drew, I’m glad it happened like this.” And he was, and that it was done without him doing any fiddling. Certainly no one

would accuse him of tearing his leg up on purpose. Drew still didn't like how he had won though.

“Only because you got hurt, I barely beat you by a second when you leg was messed up.”

“Well you landed right and I didn't, so you did the job better now didn't you?”

Drew couldn't argue with things there, and he was still very happy with how things had turned out. Speaking of which:

Final Individual Standings:

Harry Potter, Great Lakes: 92 points

Drew Baylor, Great Lakes, 92 points

Janice Watters, Salem, 76 points

Jawarhu Singh, Salem, 76 points

Reiko Aylesworth, 68 points

Watters and Singh were more wandless wonders, neither of who used them during the week as they ran rampant in History and Muggle Studies for the former and Muggle Studies and Ancient Runes for the latter. They had both entered the finals tied for the lead, but it was a hollow lead as Harry and Drew only needed a few points to pass them. Claudia would finish seventh, the same placement she got at Great Lakes, and might have had a shot at the overall if she could have shoehorned another event in.

The Great Lakes people mobbed Harry and Drew, and rightly so as they had cemented Great Lakes as the new top school in the country. An exhausted Harry, full of pain and healing potions, still went to the Cortez party, hopefully the first of two he would have in the next eight days.

The last amateur Quidditch game of his career was just a week away.

End Chapter

Author's Note: A lot of people were disquieted by the Brandon/Grant killings, and read some things into it. That's good mind you, I've taken some trouble over the story to set Rufus up as a possibly ambiguous character, and it's nice to know that it worked. On another note, we never saw a Hogwarts graduation in canon, so I felt free to make up my own version. Of course the Great Lakes graduation, like everything else to do with the school, is my version. And it has been a pleasure creating my own magical school, many thanks to JKR for Hogwarts and it's inspirations.

Saturday, June 13, 1998

Great Lakes Athletic Field

1:00 pm

The Cortez players made their walk to the Athletic Field in total silence. Their mission was clear: Win the game, or tie it. If they lost, they would lose the Quidditch Cup, and Warrick and Harry would probably never hear the end of it from Jonas. Even Drew would probably drop in a crack or four. No, they could not be having that, and Harry was never more focused for a game than he was for this, the last official game he would be playing for free in his life, even the National Team paid a nominal stipend. For Reiko it was her last game period, other than perhaps a pickup game here and there at The Hollow or The Burrow, but she was done after this. Marty was playing his first game in front of his parents and little brother, and he told Keisha and Anna that he needed to put on a show of some kind.

The morning game had been another Tim Spooneybarger classic, as he had held Proctor to one goal as Ray Elwood got the Snitch for a 160-10 Proctor victory. Each goal was on a penalty shot, but the Proctor Chasers got a lot more shots on goal, 23-3. Ray Elwood would finish his Great Lakes Quidditch career with four Snitches out of six games, both times losing to the best Seeker in the country, professional or amateur. He had declined to enter the AQA Draft, the deadline having been May 31, saying that he only played to have fun, nothing more. He was not considered a great pro prospect, but four out of six was four out of six, and he might have been drafted, who knows. Ray would go on to graduate from Georgetown undergrad

and law school, both with honors, and his distinguished law career would include a four year term as Attorney General of The United States, as well as an appointment to the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals, where he would retire at age 84, still fit and fiddle.

The teams waited at the entrance for the introductions, Herbology Professor Paul Schulze had the announcing duties today. He was not what one could call a 'dynamic' speaker, but he got the necessary information across without boring people to death. Harry's Brit group, the Professors Aylesworth, and various Forresters and Davis' were in the Cortez stands with Sophie and Marie, cheering up a storm already, and nothing had happened yet.

"For Jefferson House, their starting lineup:"

"At Keeper, a Transition from Rain Creek, Wisconsin, Charles Robinson!"

"At Seeker, a Freshman from Chicago, Illinois, Jemele Hill!"

"At Beater, an Apprentice from Anderson, Indiana, DJ Gallo!"

"At Captain and Beater, a Senior from Covington, Kentucky, Tom Friend!"

"At Chaser, a Junior from St. Paul, Minnesota, Marc Stein!"

"At Chaser, a Transition from Springfield, Illinois, Christine Brennan!"

"At Chaser, a Junior from Grand Rapids, Michigan, Sally Jenkins!"
As usual, she got the biggest cheer from the crowd. The Jefferson team had just one Senior in the bunch, that would not be coming back, and with Great Lakes losing three players, it was finally going to be their year next year.

"And now the defending Quidditch Cup Champions from Cortez!"

“ At Keeper, a Sophomore from Whitewater, Wisconsin, Jane Abbott!” Jane would actually face some shots today, something she was looking forward to.

“ At Chaser, a Senior from Alice Springs, Oklahoma, Reiko Aylesworth!”

“At Chaser, a Freshman from Georgetown, Michigan, Billy Amend!”

“ At Chaser, a Sophomore from Godric’s Hollow, Wales, Harry Potter!” And the Jefferson crowd all moaned, even though in the heart of hearts, they had been ready for this. Former starter Kim Cuthbert had not taken the news well, and likely would not go out for the team come Fall, after being replaced three times in the starting lineup in six games, all three times by Brits. She had been told the night before, and even though she had not liked it, had agreed after some judicious threats not to pass the information around.

“ At Beater, a Novice from Bloomington, Indiana, Marty Coyle!” Ozzie Coyle was in heaven as his big brother waved and called out to him on the flyby.

“At Captain and Beater, a Senior from Indianapolis, Indiana, Warrick Forrester!

“At Seeker, a Novice from Okemos, Michigan, Julie Ogden!” And so Cortez put their fate in the hands of a Novice. A Novice playing her first game, albeit after having been trained by Harry pretty thoroughly over the last few weeks.

The Captains met and shook hands, getting the ‘talk’ from guest referee John Beebe, the Keeper from AQA Champions, The Death Valley Devil Dogs, he was also the Keeper for the World Cup bound American National Team, which would be playing it’s round of 32 match against Viktor Krum and his Bulgarian mates the following weekend.

“And the Quaffle is up, Potter takes it and shoots off to the Jefferson hoops, Jenkins tries to keep up but.....GOAL! Potter shoots from 10

meters out and nails it through the bottom left hoop. 10-0 for Cortez.” Harry was a pretty good shot for someone who hadn’t played Chaser in a game in just about a year. He scored three more goals in the next 10 minutes, allowing Reiko and Billy to play defense for the most part, young Amend was developing a real talent for defending.

In minute four, Jane Abbott faced her first shot on goal since October, a Sally Jenkins toss that Harry almost blocked on its way over. Jane saved it with aplomb, and her pass to Billy was letter perfect, and he proceeded to drive to the other end and score on the Jefferson Keeper Charles Robinson, who was considered the second best player on Jefferson, even though this was only his first year as a starter.

Meanwhile in the battle of the Beaters, Warrick and Marty had agreed that Warrick would attempt to take out Seeker Jemele Hill, while Marty would go after one of the Jefferson Beaters, whichever one he was closer to. Jefferson alone of the teams did not have a reserve player, with Dan Wetzel still sitting out a suspension for punching Harry the year before, and if they lost one now.....well the game would be over unless a Quodpot player came out of the stands to sub in. And with Marty and Warrick attempting Grievous Bodily Harm with every swing, that was unlikely.

Sally would score her first goal at the 10 minute mark, and then another at 20 minutes. She was two for four in shots, but that was the real story: Just four shots in 20 minutes, as Harry was scoring so quickly that he could get back on defense to mark her. And even if she was getting the shots, Reiko and Billy were more or less camped near the corner hoops near Jane Abbott, forcing Marc Stein and Christine Brennan to try and cover Harry, and he was just too fast for the Jefferson Chasers. Jane Abbott, while still a lot busier than she usually was, had faced in her entire six game career what Tim Spoonybarger faced in a typical hour.

The scouts in the stands were all getting some definitive answers about Sally Jenkins, and they were not of the positive variety. It didn’t help her that Harry was faster than anyone playing in the AQA right now, and he kept flying one on three and scoring on the heretofore solid Charles Robinson, who had been a reserve for three years and

had faced Sally in practice for four years now, so this should not have been new to him. It wasn't working though, and Harry was able to get back on defense and disrupt Sally to his heart's content. Said scouts were now telling each other that if Harry had never once played Seeker before, he would still be the top pick just for his abilities as a Chaser.

At the 30 minute mark it was 130-20, and five more goals would make Julie Ogden's performance a moot point, because after that the plan was for Harry to stop thinking about goals and do nothing but blanket Sally. Julie and Jemele had gone on a Snitch chase one time each, but were flying so far away from each other that it did not seem like a race for the little ball was going to happen.

Speaking of happenings, Marty made Senior Captain Tom Friend's last ever school Quidditch game a memorable one by breaking his left leg with a 20 meter Bludger shot. Marty had busted something on someone in every game this year, all legally of course, and the drooling of the scouts in attendance got that much wetter. John Terry, the English National Team manager who was in attendance this day to scout Harry, would later tell our boy that he already had Marty penciled in as the number one pick in the BQL Draft of 2004, if the lad was willing to go overseas. He was a rare talent.

Friend was a trooper though, and had Doc Carter mend his leg, after which he got back in the air after a five minute delay, helped by him using Jefferson's one timeout. Marty smelled blood though, and 10 minutes later he knocked Friend out of the game by breaking his left shoulder in three places with a 15 meter shot this time. Friend's left side was in agony, and he just couldn't go on anymore.

Poor DJ Gallo, the lone Beater now for Jefferson, all but pulled a Shawnee and gave up and tried to be as far away from Marty as he could without actually flying into the stands. Friend looked plaintively into the Jefferson section of the stands, hoping that a Quodpot player would hop out and take one for the team, but to no avail. Jonas would later tell his friend Friend:

"Look dude, I'm crazy, but there's a line between crazy and suicidal and I'm not crossing it if I can help it. Just cause I'm friends with

those two, doesn't mean that they would have taken it easy on me, probably the opposite."

Meanwhile Warrick was hunting on Jemele Hill, the Seeker for Jefferson, who was one for two so far this year in Snitch catching. One reason that Julie Ogden was so far away from Hill is that she did not want to get into Bludger range.

"And there's the Snitch!" Schulze sounded very excited as the Snitch appeared halfway between Hill and Ogden. Both Seekers dove for it, right as Harry put the Cortez margin at 140 points. Hill had Warrick's position in the corner of her eye as she barreled toward the prize, she felt safe from his wrath.

But she had forgotten about Marty.

Marty was so far from DJ Gallo that he didn't bother trying to track him, Marty could only hit the ball the length of the pitch if he nailed it perfectly with a good wind, and there was no wind today. So he decided to focus on Jemele Hill, and as luck would have it, a Bludger was coming toward him as Hill went toward the Snitch. He shifted in the air and lined up a perfect shot:

WHAM!

Hill was five meters from the Snitch, 11 meters over the ground, and never knew what hit her. It nailed her directly in the left side and broke five ribs, knocking her off her broom and down to the ground, which was laden with Cushioning Charms before every game, so she just bounced a few times and laid there in agony as Carter rushed up to her. He would fix her up in the Med Station after the game, and she would be just fine this time tomorrow.

Julie, who would not have gotten to the Snitch first as it happened, now had a clear field, and right as Harry slammed home, literally, another goal, caught the Snitch, barely hanging on to the broom as she did so, a combination of inexperience and excitement. She held it up in the air as Schulze looked and sounded rather surprised.

“And Julie Ogden has the Snitch for Cortez! Cortez wins the game 330-30! Harry Potter scored 17 of the 18 goals for Cortez, Billy Amend chiming in with the other one, with Sally Jenkins scoring all three for Jefferson.”

Score, schmore, everyone agreed afterward that Marty was the player of the game. His shot on Hill had caused Cortez to win, and not tie, even though a tie too would have gained Cortez the Quidditch Cup for the second straight year. He, Reiko, Warrick, and Harry hung around as their group came down to the field, Marty bouncing up and down on the Cushioning Charms like the 12 year old kid he was. His parents reached him first and hugged him hard.

“You were magnificent son, you’re so good already, and so young still.”

“Thanks Dad, but it was those guys who taught me what I know.” He pointed to Harry and Warrick, who were beaming with pride of tutorship, all the while shaking their heads.

“Don’t listen to him Uncle Josiah, we just gave him some pointers, he did all the work in practice.”

“Right sir, it was our pleasure, but his work.”

Marty was now grinning broadly, he appreciated any praise he got from the gang, and was, deep down, very grateful about how they had looked after him all these months.

“Well we’re proud of all of you, that was some game.”

Harry had sidled up to Bill while this was going on.

“So how did everybody get along?”

“It was fine little brother, just fine. We didn’t get a chance to talk much though, with the game and everything.” The Weasleys had not gotten there until just before game time, with Bill having to work and

Arthur in a series of meetings at The Ministry, as well as a certain other event.

“Well graduation is coming up, you can all get together then too.”

“I can’t wait to meet Sophie’s mother.”

“I don’t know whether I’m looking forward to that or not, but better that she get used to you guys so that she can prepare her idiot husband.” That was as much as Harry would insult Peter Weir to other people, but Bill still chuckled. Harry’s next question was about the certain other event.

“Do I dare ask if we beat Slytherin?”

“We? I’m the only one in this conversation who is a Gryffindor alum.” Bill was joking with him, he liked giving Harry the needle every once in awhile.

“And I’m the only one that almost was murdered multiple times in that dusty old building. Come on Bill, give over.”

“They won, and Ron pitched another shutout. Ginny got the Snitch after about 30 minutes give or take.”

Harry sighed in relief, the last thing he wanted was Ron pooching his last game and not getting drafted at all by a still wary BQL.

“What was the final score?”

“Just 190-0, OUR Chasers were not that great shooting.” He loved the look on Harry’s face, this would some continuous fun for the future.

“And the other game?”

“That was the morning game, and Draco led them to the Cup. He got the Snitch and they won 320-100. So Ravenclaw was first, my

House second, then Hufflepuff and Slytherin in that order.” The meeting for The League had been in between games, Rufus having things to do after watching Gryffindor win their contest.

“That’s too bad, I was hoping that they would pull it out somehow.”

“They had the same record as last year, and the year before, and your Third Year, if you think about it: 2-1. It just so happened that this time there was a team that ran the table. It happens.” Bill was no fan of Draco, but he didn’t mind the idea of Ravenclaw winning the Quidditch Cup, as they had six years earlier, breaking a long Slytherin string that dated back to the year after Charlie left.

Everyone stayed for dinner, taking up two big tables as plans for the summer were still being hashed out and discussed. The gang was splitting up for awhile, at least during the daytime hours, with Drew, Marie, Warrick and Reiko all to be volunteering on Hollie Baylor’s campaign. Claudia and Sophie were going to be helping out at WWW, while Harry and Jonas had Quidditch and Quodpot duties to fulfill, both with the National Teams and with their own training camps beginning in late August. They would all be living together of course, in Charlottesville, and Ron and Hermione’s wedding was going to be a big event too.

The Little Three were still to be dealt with though, and Harry decided that there was no time like the present. He brought them, Rachel, and Marty and Keisha’s parents down to the trunk right before dinner and explained the way of things. They had been in the trunk a lot in the last few months, but they had no idea of the floo or the Map 2.5

Marty’s eyes got bigger than Luna’s ever did, and Rachel’s expression was one of a lot of things clicking into place at once.

“Rachel, we’re going to leave one trunk with you here at Great Lakes, and you will decide who gets into it and how often, and you’ll control the Map as well. Marty, Keisha, Anna, if Rachel feels that you’ve earned it, at the end of next year, you’ll inherit it, and probably one other, as part of you three running the business here. If that’s okay with the parental units and all.”

All eyes turned to Josiah and Grace Coyle, and Sven and Lina Peterson. Their eyes turned to each other, as Grace spoke first.

“Let me understand this: my sister and Nick know all about this?” Karen and Nick were upstairs listening for shouts of outrage.

“Yes ma’am, since just before Christmas the year before last.”

“And nothing bad has happened?” She did note how long they had known.

“Not one little thing ma’am, and a lot of things good. We don’t use it that often, so it never gets abused.”

“How expensive are these things?”

“About 10 grand, give or take. I tend to buy them in bulk.” They knew how rich Harry was, sort of, so that didn’t faze them.

“Well as long as Rachel is in charge of it next year, I have no problems, I’ve heard nothing but good things about you young lady.” Lina was next.

“Same for me, it seems to be working out just fine. If there’s a problem though Harry, I expect you to yank access.”

“Yes ma’am, but there won’t be a problem.....right?” He stared hard at the Little Three.

“Nope, no problems.” Keisha.

“None.” Anna.

“I don’t know the meaning of the word.” Marty.

None of the three were about to screw up a set-up this sweet, and now Harry looked to their present and future supervisor.

“Rachel, are you cool with this?”

“Sure thing, I’m on board, as long as you let me give you some money to buy one for myself for after I graduate.”

“Consider it done.” Harry was already planning to do the hard sell and get Rachel to UVA with the rest of them. He was amazed yet again that no parents seemed to mind all this, not realizing that they all liked him very much, and trusted him with their kids. Warrick would explain this to him later on.

Everyone left feeling really good about the situation, and the Seniors immediately buckled down for some NEWT studying, the tests started a week from Monday, though Harry, Warrick, and Reiko made token appearances at the party in Cortez that night. All three, plus Marty, were named to the school’s All-star team, joining Sally, Tim, and Ray, as Harry was named as a Chaser.

The Quodpot games the next day went more or less according to form. Shawnee beat Proctor to finish second in the overall standings, and Jefferson somewhat harshly thumped Cortez, though only by a score of 23-10, the most goals Cortez had scored on Jefferson since Jonas had made the team in his Freshman year. Cortez had lost all three games, but in each one of them, had narrowed the score from the year before. They had no Seniors on the team, and thus would have everybody back, plus perhaps Kim Cuthbert, who was a capable flyer. Jonas had a great game in his final amateur contest, and the Cortez Captain, Junior Sam Charles, had resisted temptation to conjure up a serious injury for one of his people in hopes of conning Harry into playing. He had been asked to do that by more than one of his teammates, and by a couple of alumni as well.

But Charles knew that Murray would not look too kindly on it, and satisfied himself that his team had earned the Most Improved award, never even bringing it up to Harry, who probably would have been game to try it. Next year the Cortez squad, without Jonas to worry about, would go 2-1 and finish second to Shawnee in the Quodpot

Cup, their best finish in years, capitalizing on Jonas and four other players not being there for Jefferson.

Monday, June 15, 1998 through Friday, June 19, 1998

Various Points in Great Lakes

Pretty much all day A.M and P.M.

This was the last real week of school for the Marauders, and they wanted to go out with a bang. Pranks were the order of the week, and while they had been somewhat active during the term, it was nothing compared to what they wanted to do this week. Sure most of the school, except for Transitions and Seniors, would be taking their final exams. But one could not live on studying alone.

Monday was the day that no doors would close, and no doors means no doors. Harry had discovered a de-magnetizing spell in one of his Black Library books, and since all doors in the school had at least some metal in them, it was simply a matter of legwork to load them all up. It was a simple enough spell that even the Little Three could do it, so they, the gang, and our man Ray and his best friend Jack Straw, spent a fun hour early Monday morning loading up the doors, with 13 people the work did not take that long. They used a two hour time delay, so that the non-closing wouldn't be noticed until the door's first use. Alone of those in the know about the pranks, Rachel was not used. Not for this, she had her own assignment.

The only exception that they made, in a show of funny, was Heyman's door. His was the only one left alone, even Murray couldn't close hers.

She sought Harry out after Transfiguration with Wash. She waited for him to thank Wash for everything he had done for him, this was Harry's last ever Transfiguration class. It was a nice gesture, as Harry gave his teacher a nice selection of WWW products, something he was planning to do with all his teachers. It wasn't a bribe if it was after the fact, or that's what he told himself.

“Dare I ask how long we have to wait before our doors can close?” Wash stuck around for this, he wanted to know as well.

“I set the timer for six hours, so probably during lunch things will go back to normal.”

“May we expect a week of such.....happenings?” She was smiling, and Wash actually started laughing.

“Unless you order me to bring such.....happenings to a halt, then yes you can, though Friday is the last day, we need to knuckle down come the weekend.”

“Let us note the sounds of silence. Just make sure nothing gets stolen from any unlocked rooms.”

“A Burglar Charm was part of the cocktail we used.” A Burglar Charm sounds an alarm when something is removed from a room by someone who’s magical presence is not heavy within the area.

“Well that’s different, thank you for thinking of that touch. You are so very thorough Harry.”

“You might want to credit a very short young woman who’s tops in our class for that one, but I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.” Miss Reiko Aylesworth.

“Are you done for the day?”

“Maybe, maybe not. You might not want to go near the workout room tonight.”

“Duly noted.”

The workout room, down in the basement area, was still popular even with the sports finished for the term. It was used for stress relief mostly, the twins had gotten a lot of use out of it during their own NEWT work.

Rachel Kessler had been in charge of the workout room, and had filled it with a mild form of laughing gas. No one used the room during class hours, for the most part, so it wasn't until after dinner that students started coming back from their never begun workouts laughing maniacally for no reason at all. Some of the students never did figure out what all the fuss was about, and never connected to dots. About 45 of them were affected, though none were in the same room as any gang members. Though that last part would not be the case all week.

Tuesday was all about the Lounges, as dung bombs were the order of the morning. Sometimes the old tricks are the best, as the twins told anyone who would listen. They came in specially to help this day, and took turns wandering the halls in Harry's Invisibility Cloak. The bombs went off at various intervals during the morning, and more than a few of the older students took their exams with Bubble Head Charms to avoid the stench of some of their classmates.

By contrast, the afternoon and evening had the Lounges smelling like lavender.

Yes, lavender.

It was Jonas' idea, a tribute to the loose morals of one Lavender Brown, whose carnal seduction of Mr. Dean Thomas had been Jonas' gateway into the heart of Ginny. I love you's had not yet been exchanged, but Jonas was just waiting for their next date alone together to do so. Not counting the trunk, he assumed correctly that Harry had all the trunks bugged.

So a very heavy dose of lavender was the constant smell in the four Lounges, so much so that most of the male students either studied in their dorm rooms or braved the library, the one place everyone knew wouldn't be hit. The ladies of Great Lakes loved it, and most of them were in good moods all evening.

It wasn't a prank necessarily, at least most of the gang didn't think so. But Jonas rarely demanded things at pranking meetings, so they let him have his way. It was also the only 'prank' that week whose

context needed to be explained to people, and Joans was more than willing to take credit for it. When told about it Saturday, Ginny would just start giggling.

Wednesday's menu included rabbit. That is to say, rabbits let loose in the halls, hopping around like crazy. These was not conjured up rabbits either, the twins and Bill had bought out several pet stores in the greater London area, promising up and down to the very suspicious store clerks that the rabbits would be alive and unharmed at the end of their use.

That didn't satisfy most of them, and the twins especially became very skilled at Obliviation.

It was Riley Poole's idea, he had always liked rabbits and meant to get one as a pet at some point, he had just never gotten around to it. Well he had his pick now, that's for sure. The furry little folk were kept well fed by bowls of lettuce, carrots, and other rabbit food that just happened to appear in random places in the halls. It didn't help that it was mating season for them.....well it didn't help those who didn't like rabbits anyway, and some very impressionable Novices and Freshman were treated to many instances of rabbits doing the wild thing right in front of them, sometimes during the middle of their exams too. It was a National Geographic day at Great Lakes, and eventually Murray sought out Harry and Sophie, who were in the Cortez Lounge surrounded by some rabbits that they were feeding.

"All I want to know is this: What are you going to do with all these animals once your fun is over?"

"Some will go to The Hollow, some to The Burrow, and the rest will be given away as pets to anyone who wants them. They're not magical rabbits obviously, but they are cute." Indeed Sophie had already picked out the newest member of the gang, who would be allowed to roam free in the backyard of the Charlottesville property.

"Rabbits. Okay, if I had tried to guess what you were going to do today, that would not have even made my top 100."

“Why thank you Professor Murray, I’m not sure you’ve ever paid me a higher compliment.” Harry was very pleased at the comment, and Murray just laughed herself as well. She patted him on the shoulder and went back to her office.

There were no other pranks for the day, just a lot of students trying to shoo or Banish rabbits from their rooms. A few of them got past the net, so to speak, and more than one kid was woken up by a rabbit jumping on his or her bed. Not the ideal alarm clock really, but no one was bitten.

No rabbits were killed during the course of the day though, as Harry had quietly put out the word that anyone harming a rabbit would have something twice as bad done to them. That’s twice as bad if they were very, very lucky. He was obeyed without much grumbling. I mean who doesn’t like bunnies?

Thursday the pranking involved just two targets: Mark Foster and Lester Munson. They had the honor due to being the roommates of Drew and Jonas. Drew and Jonas had not been so much as friends during their first five years, but they were still seen as the enemy by their roomies, and treated as such. Indeed there were a few times when former Deputy Headmistress Colleen Flynn had had to intervene on behalf of the future gang members when some of their things were broken or ‘mislaid’, resulting in mass detentions for the other two. Shades of Luna even, perhaps that was one reason why Drew had gone for her. Veritaserum had been involved, and no 12 year old can remotely fight that, so the two of them just looked stupid and vindictive, though it did not bring Drew and Jonas into friendship.

So Mark and Lester had laid off, and upon her ascension to the Great Lakes throne, Professor Murray had been made aware of the tension in the room and laid down the law, ensuring a tense peace over the next four years. Harry’s intervention had drawn Drew into the gang, and it had been in the back of everyone’s mind to finally nail those two.

Funny that word, nail. It can be used as shorthand for fingernails too, and that was the first prank. Drew and Jonas did not sleep in their room Wednesday night, but somehow someone, perhaps more than

one person, got into their room and gave Mark and Lester each a manicure, painting their nails blue and purple respectively. The varnish wouldn't come off either, and screams of outrage could be heard by those getting up around the same time.

It just so happened that this was another time when the Marauders signed their work, and Half Pint and B.C. were floating in bubbles along the Jefferson dorm corridor. Sophie and Marie were careful to wear socks this day, or their own toenails might have given away who was 'guilty' here.

It didn't end there either, as more word bubbles followed the two of them around everywhere they went this day, with their hands in their pockets as much as possible. The bubbles were not quite profane, but did go into five and six word detail about, among other things, their lack of intelligence, class, personal hygiene, and sexual performance.

Okay that last one was profane.

Of course they knew what was going on, but they didn't know what to do about it. Drew and Jonas each had a four compartment trunk that held all of their stuff, including their bed linens on this day, and each trunk had a note laminated on the top:

"This trunk had been Pink'd. So keep your larcenous thoughts to yourself."

Very subtle, but at the same time brutally effective.

So that was not an option. Nor were Murray and Heyman terribly sympathetic when they were complained to at lunch.

"Just ignore it guys, the bubbles will probably be gone sometime after dinner."

"But everyone is laughing at us Professor Murray! This isn't right!"

The two administrators, on some level, knew that they should put a stop to this. But they didn't, for one main reason:

Drew.

Jonas always had friends that he could hang around, before the early gang starting Sophomore Year it was his Quodpot teammates, or his groupies. But Drew would just retreat into his shell, concentrating on his work. He would only complain to them when something was damaged beyond his ability to fix it magically, which was every so often, and Murray would sometimes have to give threatening looks out just in case. The harassment was not every day, but the hint of it was there, the unfriendliness was always there, and Drew was alone. Until Harry, and one reason that Murray had resolved to let our boy do most of what he wanted, was that Harry had befriended Drew on the very day that he met him. No hesitation, just meeting him, dueling him in class, and then inviting him over to the table for dinner.

And it wasn't just Murray, any faculty reluctance to embrace The Boy Who Lived Experience went by the wayside.

And now Joanne just stared hard at the two of them.

“Go over to Drew and Jonas, get on your knees, and beg them for forgiveness. Then certain people might not go to Phase Three, and you know there will be one. It's your choice.”

Heyman just stared blankly at the two of them, not inclined to add anything.

Mark and Lester had two choices: they could beg for forgiveness, or take their whupping like men and be done with it at day's end.

So of course they took a third option: They fled like dogs.

Lester had a magical tent and he and Mark took it, with their study materials and some food supplies, and camped out in the Athletic Field for the next two days and change, only coming back on Sunday, when the pranking was completed. Harry knew where they went within about an hour, and contented himself with short sheeting their

beds for when they got back, done personally. Drew and Jonas were satisfied that justice had been done, and left the two roommates alone for their camping trip.

The last day, Friday, was all about taking credit, as bubbles with the Marauders' names floated through the hall, including nicknames hastily come up with by their four male, two female auxiliaries. By Claudia's count, they had done 123 pranks of some sort since January, 1997, when she had begun to keep track of them. The names floated in the halls in recognition.

Prongs

Half Pint

Cherlindrea

Kilroy

Magician

Quicksilver

B.C.

Madamartigan

Dr. Pepper

Snapple

And the auxiliaries of Ray, Jack, Rachel, Marty, Keisha, and Anna, in that order:

Wyatt Earp

Doc Holliday

Insider

Shaft

Arwen

Outsider

The bubbles couldn't be popped, and a lot of the conversation at mealtimes was which person fit which nickname. Warrick got asked a lot if he was Shaft, but he just smiled and said that he didn't know what they were talking about. Marie's roommates knew that she had to be B.C., but they had known that since October, when the name had started appearing. Alone of the names floating, Ray and Jack didn't know the true meaning of the nicknames, since they didn't know about the Map 2.5, which was now in the more than capable hands of Insider, also known as Rachel Kessler.

Professor Murray had just one comment, as the gang was leaving dinner, their last prank, Great Lakes category, now done.

"A very classy finish Harry.

"Thank you ma'am, we aim to please."

"How much trouble are your young friends going to be without you to guide them?"

"They won't be trouble ma'am, if you give them the same deal you gave me."

She pondered that for a moment.

"The same deal, with the same limits. And their Flackter Alley delivery business stays within bounds as well."

"Done."

"Done."

Everyone smiled, The Marauders, Iteration Three, were all set to ride.

Monday, June 22, 1998

Great Lakes Dining Hall

8:30 am

It was the last week of school, and the week of OWL's and NEWT's for the Transitions and Seniors, and pretty much everyone in both classes were stressed out about it. The end of the year tests for the other five classes were held the week before amid a lot less commotion, and tears. That left the field, and the library, cleared for the 90 odd people in the Transition and Senior classes, as the other five years were banned from the library without specific permission for a faculty member. Hogwarts had had their NEWT's the week before as well, but Hermione had been firm in saying that no visits would be going back and forth, since the Great Lakes people needed to concentrate on their exams. The same ban had been in place during the Marauders' prank-a-thon, while Hermione, Ron, and Neville were taking their NEWT's.

For the NEWT's, there would be two separate test times for each class, depending on the vagaries of one's class schedule. So each student had to pick the times that fit them best, for the Seniors this was an unpleasant reminder of the Olympic selections, and it came pretty quickly on the heels of it as well. There were two sections to each NEWT: Written and Practical. Even in History there was a practical, as so few students were taking the NEWT, those doing so would have a two-on-one conversation/debate with the proctor. Each Written would take two hours, with the Practical lasting 90 minutes or less, depending on the subject. Anti-Cheating Parchments, similar to Hermione's about the DA and Harry's about the trunk, were used to prevent students from the first of the sections blabbing, verbally or otherwise, to any second section people about what to expect.

Harry had managed to schedule his one subject per day for the week, in the mornings today, Tuesday, and Friday, with his afternoons on Wednesday and Thursday. No one in the gang was taking more than five NEWT exams, and only Marie and Warrick took the tack of front loading their schedules, they would both be done by Thursday

morning. The other six would finish on Friday morning, there being no NEWT's scheduled for the afternoon that day.

Today, for Harry, was Muggle Studies. He, Jonas, and Marie took a two hour written exam on pretty much everything the course had covered over their five years taking it. Of course Harry had not taken it for five, but he had Ziegler's notes for the three years he missed. His goal here was nothing more than an A, though an E would be nice if it happened. The test was a combination of True-False, Multiple Choice, and two Essay questions to round things out. It was meant to take the entire two hours, and it did. Harry had just finished his conclusion when the 'bell', an egg timer, sounded. Harry shook his hand vigorously, he had some bad writer's cramp, but there was no time to rest.

Next up, immediately, was the practical, which like History, was a series of discussions with government types qualified to judge these things. The three of them were introduced to Education Department member Gustavo Kuerten, and they proceeded to talk about pretty much everything under the sun, muggle-wise, for the next 90 minutes. All three were asked questions by the visitor, and encouraged to expound at length, and build on the answers given by others. All in all it was a diverting way to spend an hour and a half, and Harry was very pleased with how he had done after all was finished. He immediately retired, after a nice lunch, to his trunk, where Transfiguration notes awaited, that was his exam on Tuesday.

Transfiguration went 'fine', according to Harry after his tests the next day. He didn't feel really great about it. As he said to Sophie:

"I did okay on the practical.....well I did pretty well when I think about it now. There were just some things that threw me a little on the written part. I think I got my E no problem, but an A wouldn't kill me."

For Harry and Marie, NEWT's were in a way a waste of time, since they had absolutely no need to find jobs after their time at UVA. Harry's main goal was to get at least a pair of O's and three E's, and for heaven's sake he wanted to thump Ron. Marie wanted at least an E in everything, she had a job waiting for her with her family's corporation after graduation, the Fords were much more wealthy than

Harry even. Likewise Jonas just needed a university degree, nothing more, and he would take his place with the family business on a part-time basis until his Quodpot days were over. He cared about NEWT's because his father cared about them, nothing more really.

The other five cared about them a lot, with Reiko and Warrick still searching for a career, and Claudia needing a top NEWT score if she was going to get teaching job for History, or perhaps Muggle Studies. Professor Mendoza couldn't last forever could he? Sophie had no interest in being a rich housewife, while Drew knew that he would be under a lot of scrutiny, being the son of the next President. Due to term limits, Drew would still be in his mid-20's when Hollie left office, but he was still feeling the pressure even now.

Charms was Wednesday for everyone, as this was the one section they all took en masse. Indeed Charms and Transfiguration were the only subjects that all eight of them were taking, as Marie was not doing Defense. The written part was all theory, and to an extent, some ethics as well. The ethics part dealt mainly with muggle secrecy issues, as well as underage magic and the like. This stuff was only taught the last term, since it would be preparation for the students entering 'the real world'.

The practical was a five minute demonstration of various Charms, with emphasis on proper technique, speed, and ability to hold the Charm in place. Harry felt that in particular he aced this part, and had done well enough on the written part to garner his O.

Thursday was History, and Harry, Sophie, Claudia, and Marie were four of the eight students taking this test, though pretty much everyone Transition was taking the OWL. The written test was a mass of questions about mostly American magical history, with a smattering of well known world events as well. Harry was somewhat amused to find one Grindelwald question as well as one about Dumbledore. And he was beyond grateful to find absolutely none about himself, though that was not the case for the British NEWT test. Despite having missed the five years of Lyman instruction that that OWL people and the other seven NEWT folk received, Harry felt pretty optimistic about how he did. Lyman had helped design past

NEWT exams, and he had prepped Harry pretty well last summer after the return from Britain.

The practical was more discussion, this time one-on-one, as each of the students got 20 minutes with the proctors, no pun intended. Harry's examiner was, by coincidence, Lyman's predecessor as History teacher, she was now a Congresswoman colleague of Hollie Baylor. They talked about Lycan wars for most of their time, not touching at all on Harry's own one hour Lycan war, and she did seem impressed after she left. At least that's what he told himself afterward. He was trying to be optimistic.

In the 140 minutes that he spent on his History NEWT, Harry answered just one question about goblins. One. As soon as he got back to the trunk he dispatched Dobby with a scathing letter to Remus, informing him about this and requesting permission to send a Howler to Binns, who seemed to lecture about little else but goblins. Dobby told Harry that the Hogwarts Headmaster got a nice laugh out of it, and his reply was hastily scribbled on the back of Harry's own letter.

Dear Harry,

According to Professor Flitwick, Binns does not acknowledge Howlers, harsh words, or anything of the like, and all have been tried on him over the last years. Just tell Hermione to hurry up and graduate from muggle university will you?

Good luck tomorrow, and have a happy graduation. I wish I could be there to see it, I can't wait for a visit with your pensieve.

See you Sunday,

Moony

"I'm going to have a word with that man.....ghost.....whatever."

"Yes Harry, but Remus anticipated this and told me to tell you that nobody knows what Binns does with his free time on the weekends,

and he has not made a habit of going to official events.” To Dobby’s disquiet, this did not persuade his boss of much of anything.

“Go to Hogwarts again and find Peeves, ask what his price would be to start harassing Binns. Anything up to 100 Galleons in WWW products, you can agree to right there, otherwise forget it, I’ll think of something else.”

Dobby just nodded and popped off. Regrettably, he would not be able to find Peeves, despite an exhaustive search. At least that’s what he told Harry, Dobby felt that trying to mess with a geriatric ghost simply was not worth the time, effort, or cash, and since Harry could not understand that.....well Dobby could. He simply chalked it up to NEWT stress and hoped that Harry would forget about it until it was too late.

Friday, June 26, 1998

The last day of NEWT’s, and in theory, the easiest for Harry, he would be doing Defense. He had planned this well, eschewing the Tuesday offering that Sophie, Warrick, and Claudia had taken. Harry, Drew, Jonas, and Reiko would be going today, and as usual for Harry, the written part was the harder one. He was much better at this kind of thing than he used to be, but he was still more of a practical kind of guy. He still did fine though, as none of the questions stumped him really, and he blitzed through quite a few of them.

The Practical part of it was Harry’s bread and butter though. He demonstrated his Patronus of course, though this time was not the only one who could do that particular charm. Reiko, Sophie, Drew, and Liesel Matthews could do them as well, even if Liesel was the only one of them entering the Auror Academy, along with Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell, both of whose Patronuses needed some polishing. The rest of the Practical was some dodging, a bit of destruction, and some other demonstrations. He went right after Drew, the others had long since finished, and a relaxed by now Harry felt that he could not have done better.

He and Drew barely got back in time for lunch, and lunch was very important, on this, the last day of any kind of magical classes:

The 1998 AQA Amateur Draft was being simulcast on the WRA, Wizard Radio America. The draft started at 12:30 pm, and the gang was just sat down when AQA Commissioner Janet Evans came on the air, welcoming the audience to the live coverage of the draft. She made a short speech, after announcing that the New York Dragons were on the clock, talking about the AQA's goals for the coming season, and giving a brief rundown of some of the rookies that the fans were likely to enjoy watching. At 12:40, she handed the microphone over to James McPherson of the Dragons.

“The New York Dragons, with the first pick in the 1998 AQA Draft, select Harry Potter, Seeker/Chaser from Great Lakes.”

The room erupted in a huge round of applause as Harry stood up and waved. He had a huge smile on his face, and one would almost think that this was not a foregone conclusion. He refused entreaties for a speech, only saying:

“I love Great Lakes, The University of Virginia, and now the New York Dragons.....oh yeah, and I like Hogwarts very much now that one of my friends is the Headmaster.” A bit of a cheeky grin accompanied that last little bit, and roars of laughter greeted it, even from Novices who had no clue what he was talking about. Well, they wouldn't be Novices this time tomorrow anyway.

The AQA only had the four teams, and there were only two rounds in the draft, so a lot of padding and commentating was used to fill up the hour. After about 30 more minutes the first round was over, and the Dragons, who had only won two games out of the 24 game schedule, took the podium again.

“The New York Dragons, with the first pick in the second round, select Warrick Forrester, Beater from Great Lakes.” Everyone from the smartest Senior to the dimmest Novice saw this one coming too, all assumed that Harry had leaned on New York to pick Warrick, which was true of course. But few begrudged it really, Warrick was a very good player, and had the potential to become great with some decent coaching. That was one thing that school teams never got:

coaching. Harry, for one, had never had an adult lesson in his life, even Charlie had not really given him any tips. The American teams understood this, which is why with the next pick:

“The Miami Humidity, with the second pick in the second round, select Tim Spooneybarger, Keeper from Great Lakes.”

Shawnee went nuts, it was their first draft pick since any of them had been in school, and Tim look a bit embarrassed. Warrick had given a nice little 30 second speech, thanking all of his past teammates and such, and now Tim stood up.

“Ya’ll aren’t going to make me say anything are you?”

Cries of ‘Speech, Speech.’ told him yes, they were.

“Well like Warrick did, I want to thank my teammates, past and present. I know we didn’t do that well on the scoreboard, but I had a great time playing Quidditch for the best House in the place these last four years. It was a lot of fun, and I look forward to playing for Miami.” The official rules were that draft picks were guaranteed a one year contract, and since that was the case, they all made it on to the roster, even if it was unlikely that they would actually play. Harry was set to play from minute one at some position, and Warrick was a candidate to play right away himself.

Tim would wait over two years to get into a non-blowout situation, but was so eager and willing in practice, that he wound up having an 11 year career in the AQA, starting 44 games over the course of it, and making a nice living while he went to school part-time. He would always volunteer to guest referee Quidditch games at his alma mater, and was one of Shawnee’s most popular graduates.

Later on in the afternoon, the Australasian Quidditch Alliance would have their draft, a four round affair, and Harry would be taken in the third round by the Jakarta Jocundries, the Australasia champions for three years running. Via telephone in Murray’s office, they made a nice offer that Harry politely declined, but he promised to keep an

open mind if things changed in the U.S. Warrick was not taken in said draft, nor was any other Great Lakes player.

At dinner, the highlight was the Quodpot draft, live and on the RWA. Jonas was not exactly on pins and needles, but it was still a thrill to hear:

“And the New York Thunderbolts, with the first pick in the draft, select Jonas Steele, Midfielder from Great Lakes!”

The Thunderbolts had had the second pick the year before, and after the death of their preferred pick Ryan Chappelle, had traded it to New England for the pick that wound up being number one now. Not a bad deal for either team, and now Jonas, Warrick, and Harry would be playing in the same stadium, located in the Hamptons, just a short floo ride from Charlottesville. The gang's table was full of cheer for more than just the end of their school time. Their Saturdays and Sundays would be rather busy during the school months, with campus events and professional flying games to go to. They wouldn't have had it any other way though.

Six other Great Lakes players/students were taken over the course of the four round draft, a relatively low number that reflected the paucity of Senior athletes that were any good this year. Only nine draft choices total in the two sports, the lowest number in many years, and Spooneybarger was considered something of a fluke. Jefferson, after losing three terrific players from the year before due to death and graduation, saw another four lifted from them, though Jonas was the only one to go in the first round. This would end their Quodpot Cup string the following year, when in a rebuilding phase, they would finish third. In compensation though, Sally Jenkins would lead the Jefferson squad to the Quidditch Cup in dominating fashion, though Jane Abbott would still do the best of the three Keepers against her.

After dinner, the gang would have their last private party as a group of students, it was just them and their associates this night, as they prepped for the relatives invasion of the next day. Everyone but Claudia would have someone there, with Harry's group numbering well over two dozen, and logistics had to be planned. The ceremony was due to start at noon, with dinner five hours later. Harry had

requested permission to set up a tent outside, telling Murray and Heyman:

“I alone am going to have over 20 people coming, add that to the others, and I don’t know if our Dining Hall can fit everyone without taking the places of actual students. I’ll just call it an open house like the muggle teenagers do, and everyone will be welcome to stop in, or something like that.” The Great Lakes Dining Hall was built to hold the student body, faculty, and about 20 more. The Brits alone would supply the 20 more.

They didn’t see the harm, and Harry wrote them a check for the extra food that he and his group were going to need. That was the one thing that Harry simply loved about being rich:

Got a logistical problem? Throw some money at it. and either make it go away, or turn it into a plus. It was not a NEWT level skill, but he was getting very good at it anyway.

Saturday, June 27, 1998

Hogwarts, Office of the Headmaster

Noon GMT

The group headed for Great Lakes had now assembled, Professor Sinistra hurrying in as the last one there. Remus looked at the five ‘kids’, not that he thought of them as that any longer.

“Remember you five, you represent Hogwarts. I know that no one is going to mess with you at all, nobody there will want to risk Harry’s wrath, but I just want you to keep in mind that you’re strangers in a strange land. Have fun, and we’ll see you back here tonight.” He didn’t sound at all stern, just hopeful that things would go well.

McGonagall, while idly wondering if Dumbledore would have even considered letting any of them out of the castle to attend this graduation, took over.

“Now then, we will floo to the twins’ shop, where we will meet the Weasleys, Weasley wives, Lee Jordan, and certain guests from The Ministry. This will be quite the large group, though of course we are all among friends. Professor Flitwick, if you will go first.” Flitwick went, followed by Sprout and the five students, then Sinistra and McGonagall herself.

Waiting for them were all the Weasleys, plus Rufus, Travis, and Travis’ wife Rebecca. Peter Tyson would be meeting them there with his wife, they were on vacation in California at the moment. Rufus smiled at them all, amazed still that Harry had not only invited McGonagall to come see him graduate, but that she had accepted as well. He felt a bit of paternal pride while thinking that, he had taught the lad well, life really was about putting your foes on notice wasn’t it?

“Well then, are we all here? Good, our itinerary is this: Here to Reykjavik, then on to Halifax, Boston, and then via floo to Michigan. We’ll be resting for 30 minutes at a time at our stops, in deference to Ginny and Luna, but since there are so many of us to chat with, time should fly by. Arthur, do you have the portkeys?”

“Yes sir.” He took out a bag and enlarged it, it was full of jump ropes, which were easy for people to get a touch on, which was all that was necessary for the travel. They all trooped out to the back of the shop, which was locked, locked, and relocked with as many security provisions as the twins and Lee could think of, and they could think of a lot. They would only be gone for half a day, give or take, but there was no point in being unprepared.

Two hours later:

Fred was the first person out of the floo in Murray’s office, the group was right on time. George was leading the way in Heyman’s quarters next door, with Bill flooing into Josh Lyman’s office down the hall. This was all pre-arranged, and they were the only group not coming in by direct portkey, since they were so large, and Rufus preferred not to make a scene. He was right after Fred into Murray’s office, and laid eyes on Joanne for the first time since her teaching stint back in 1989.

“Professor Murray, lovely to see you again.”

“Minister Scrimgeour, welcome.” She had been up since 6:00 am, preparing for the longest day of her year, and this was not the first family group that she had greeted, even at the early hour of 8:00 am. They shook hands.

“Please, call me Rufus.” He stepped aside as Angelina came through, quickly followed by Ginny.

“I’m Joanne. Easy trip?”

“Not bad at all really, surprised the dickens out of the station at Halifax, they don’t usually get groups our size coming in, unless its for the Quidditch World Cup.” He motioned for Ginny and Hermione to come forward.

“This is Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger, two of Harry’s friends. The others are.....” Ron came through right now.

“Well here’s Ron, I expect you’ve heard all about them by now.” Oh indeed she had, as she shook hands with all of them, keeping a friendly smile on her face as she laid eyes on the five students that she had heard so much about over the last 23 months. Her office door was cracked open, and she could hear the others coming by. By the time everyone was out, Dobby came in.

“Greetings Minister and Weasleys, Harry is on his way.”

Speak of the devil, Harry walked in seconds later. He spent a lot of time shaking hands and giving and receiving hugs, to the point that Murray was in a bit of wonderment at a young man who had grown up without any family at all really, and now he had all of these people. Murray herself had a friendly hello for Sinistra and Sprout, and a polite one for McGonagall, still wondering what she was doing here.

“It’s a bit crowded for a tour, but just keep an eye on the person in front of you and we’ll get through it just fine. We’re going up one flight, there’s not too many people in our Lounge right now.” He led the way,

and everyone trooped after him. The Baylors, Forresters, Davis', Steeles, Fords, and the Aylesworths would not be arriving for another hour, so this was the first of many tours.

There was no breakfast today, but brunch would begin at 9:30 and last right up until the time that everyone had to leave for the ceremony. So the Lounge was pretty empty right now, as the jaws of the DOM's dropped, hit the floor, and sounded very loud indeed. They took in the mass of computers, the three big screen televisions, and the plethora of couches and easy chairs and wanted to start screaming at McGonagall and her brethren. They didn't though, Hermione found her voice first.

"This is just ONE of the Lounges? There are others just like it for the other Houses?"

"Yep, the other three are pretty much identical."

"And they're for what, 80 people?"

"Give or take, yeah." Gryffindor had been 74 this year, and Hermione was envisioning all that she could have gotten done with this system in place. Admittedly a system paid for with CD and DVD royalties, among other patents held by the magical government, resources that Rufus and his bean counters didn't have, at least until they started seizing vaults that is.

"I'm so sorry that I didn't take you up on your offer Harry, this is amazing, the resources you've had here." Harry studiously avoided looking at his former Transfiguration teacher, and kept his face neutral.

No, this did not sit well with McGonagall, or Sprout for that matter, but given who had said it, they had no comment. Hermione was all but out of their reach at the moment, though they were sure that Ginny at least was in total agreement. Flitwick had seen all of this before, with his year at Pathfinder, but had rarely spoken of his year abroad to his colleagues. Sinistra, the only member of the Remus bloc to be here right now, was totally with Hermione, and would have some hard

questions for The Ministry when she got back. Harry decided to avoid any confrontations right about now, and changed the subject.

“If any of you who haven’t seen one before want to see one of our dorm rooms, come along with me. I doubt all of us can fit in mine, so maybe some adult Weasleys could stay behind. Please don’t wreck a television Arthur.” Much laughter, and the Hogwarts and Ministry types followed Harry to Cortez 7B, where Rick and Terry were about to leave, and Warrick had just finished getting dressed. The three roommates were introduced to everyone, and Rick and Terry left to go meet their parents, who would be coming in with the mass portkey groups that included the rest of the non-Aylesworth parents, Reiko’s family would be coming via floo from Tecumseh. Warrick had technically met McGonagall and Flitwick at Bill’s wedding, but this was the first friendly moment they had seen him in, and he showed them around the relatively small room, it was about 2/3 the size of a Hogwarts room, with four people living there instead of five or six. This was one thing Hermione was not jealous about, she would comment later that it was basically a hotel room. She was used to a regular Hogwarts room with just three girls in it too. The DOM’s made a point of not commenting on the trunk in the corner of the room, and thankfully none of the faculty and Ministry seemed to take notice of it.

They didn’t SEEM to, but Travis immediately spotted the Anthony Hook creation, one of his long-delayed projects was to crack the man’s security features once and for all and find out just what secrets those things had, he assumed that there must be some hidden tricks in it. Hook was very careful not to sell a trunk floo capable model to someone in the government, and had thus far escaped serious inquiry. Travis decided then and there that he would set Robert Marr on as soon as he got back. Rufus just looked around with a sense of nostalgia. Having no children himself, he had rarely been back in a dorm since his own graduation, and this was one of the few moments in his life where he wished he had chosen a slightly different path.

“I noticed you boys are all packed, does that mean you’re coming back with us to Britain tonight?” He had assumed that the gang would be coming to the Hogwarts graduation, if only so that they could get

the same tour there that the DOM's would be getting here. Warrick answered him.

“Yes sir Minister, we were hoping to hitch a ride with you folks. Though we don't need to be packed, given Dobby and Winky can do it in seconds.”

Just then Sophie, Reiko, and Marie came down the hall, having just gotten ready. They greeted the newcomers and were introduced to those necessary. Harry looked at his watch.

“I would offer you lot a tour around school, but there honestly is not that much to see. The library is much like Hogwarts, though I prefer Mrs. Hoffman to Madam Pince, and the classrooms are nothing that we didn't see in muggle primary school. You'll see the Athletic Field soon enough. So if you'll follow me, we'll go back down to the setup I have outside and get reacquainted.” Everyone seemed to be fine with that, this was the gang's turf and all. He led them down the escalator, the movement of which did unnerve a couple of the faculty. They snuck a peek into the Dining Hall, which was again disappointingly utilitarian to the Hogwarts people, and Sinistra and Harry started talking about it as they went to the tent he had set up, on the south side of the school.

It was not a circus tent per se, but it was large enough to hold everyone he thought it might have to. It was protected from the wind by the school building itself, and had a series of tables for seating, and a buffet line. The school would provide most of the food, which Harry had of course paid for, and Dobby and Winky would be cooking up too. The two elves were due to leave for Charlottesville as soon as this was over, to get everything set up there, as the gang would be officially moving in there Monday morning. Sophie and the others left after a few minutes, to go get their parental units.

Michael Steele, in a fit of generosity, had volunteered to escort Wendy, Ned, and Jason Weir on their portkey journey. Barbara Steele, whom Harry had still never met, was not able to make the trip, she was 'feeling unwell', as Michael put it.

In reality she was undergoing a detox stay at the American version of St. Mungo's, The Pandora Center, and would not be breathing free air for another two months.

But Michael never mentioned any of that to Wendy Weir. She had told her husband that she and their sons were going hunting for a vacation home, just like she had told Sophie, though in reality they had driven up to Milwaukee and rented a hotel room for a few days. Michael picked them up there and on to Flackter Alley, where they joined a few dozen parents and relatives for the trip up to Michigan. Among them were the Forresters and Davis', and Michael made the introductions.

Nick and Karen were politely friendly to Wendy Weir, but just couldn't shed their minds of her culpability in Sophie's banishment, though they gave her points for acknowledging the tension right off the bat.

"I can only imagine what you must have heard about me over the years, but....." She got no further, as Karen held up a hand.

"That's all in the past Wendy, if Sophie forgives you, that's good enough for us." Nods all around, and all three Weirs breathed a sigh of relief. Nick continued.

"Besides, Harry's the most unforgiving boy I've ever met, and if he's not rubbed off on her there, she'll be fine." He was grinning as he said this, which calmed Wendy down even more, if there was anyone in life that she was afraid of it was Harry, but this man seemed able to mock him at will, so it couldn't be that bad.

"Well I know that he considers all of you to be family, and since he and Sophie are marrying, I suppose that we'll all be in-laws."

The incongruity of that put Warrick's family into a series of guffaws, while Ned and Jason took the opportunity to ask Uncle Antonio for a couple of autographs, this being the basketball star's first trip back to his magical alma mater in about a decade, since his own graduation. Even though he was about to be locked out of training camp in a few

months, the stipends for Warrick, Marty, and Keisha would still continue.

Right before the next group of portkey people left, the Baylors and Fords arrived, having met at Mitchell's office. As the family of the two newest gang members, they had never met any of the others before, aside from some of Warrick's family attending one of Hollie's speeches, as she was their Congresswoman. Strangely they had never met Michael, despite Drew and Jonas being roommates for seven years, but they were soon talking like old friends.

The portkey left a few minutes later, and the four families all appeared in the designated area, on the other side of the school from Harry's tent. Their kids were waiting for them, Marty and Keisha having gotten there ahead of time to make sure no one got there early. Hugs all around, as grandparents laid eyes on the kids for the first time in many months. Speaking of which, Reiko queried Wendy:

"I thought your husband's parents were supposed to be coming?"
The magical ones.

"They are, they're supposed to meet us here at 11:00, or so they wrote." Wendy was much less nervous than a couple of hours ago, she had feared the other parents the most, and Reiko had long decided to let her off the hook.

"We'll make sure that they find the group." She raised her voice a bit.

"If everyone will follow us, we have a tent set up on the other side of school, where brunch will be served. Wendy, Ned, Jason, we'll show you around the school after the ceremony. We don't have to leave for Britain until later on, so there's plenty of time." The second large group trooped after her and walked around to the other side of the school.

Where Reiko discovered her parents and both sets of grandparents had arrived. They had come in through the trunk floo, in a slight change of plans, and were busy getting to know the Weasleys, at least the grandparents were. Harry, in a fit of mischievousness, was

putting a distinctly uncomfortable Charlie and Rachel together, following through on his threat after his and Sophie's engagement. Karl and Lisa were chatting up Flitwick, already talking a bit of shop, it turned out that they had met him a couple of times during his Pathfinder tenure, though he had not gotten to know them well enough then to learn that they had a daughter. Reiko saw her parents at least once a week now, but still ran up to hug them, and both sets of grandparents, who were busy being entertained by Fred and George.

Harry, seeing the newcomers, was now grateful that he had thought of nametags, which were being handed out to everyone as they came in by Anna Kessler, the only one, along with her older sister, who was not graduating or a relative of a graduates, American category. This spared him the task of pointing everyone out en masse, though he did have a few words to say before brunch was served.

"We, the eight graduates, would like to welcome all of you to our mass open house. We're so glad that you all could come for our special day, one that we've been looking forward to for seven years now.....though when I started school I was not imagining this as my graduation setting." Chuckles all around, even from McGonagall.

"You all are very important to us, thank you for being here."

Fred and George started a round of applause, and soon over four dozen people were clapping as the eight graduates stood up in their chairs and took a group bow. Even Drew was up there, and this was usually not his kind of thing.

Warrick stayed standing up, as he and Reiko had an announcement to make, once that round of applause died down.

"Reiko would like to announce that she has finally given in to my incessant begging and agreed to marry me."

And cue the clapping again, as their particular families surged forward to congratulate them. Reiko held up her left hand with the giant ring on it, and more than just the ring glowed.

Harry and the other gang guys all but gang tackled Warrick, and it took the three of them too since he was so big. Harry whispered to his roommate.

“At least I know that you spent my money wisely.” Harry had wound up paying for a little over half the cost of the ring.

“I’ll pay you back soon, don’t worry.”

Harry already had a plan for that, he would have Warrick put the money in a special trust that he would match, and the proceeds would go toward buying WWW products for those students who couldn’t afford them. He would call it Fun Scholarship. At least that was the plan right now.

Harry then wandered over to Wendy, her sons were talking to Bill and Charlie, the Weasley men had been asked ahead of time to put Jason and Ned at ease if at all possible.

“Still nervous?”

“Not really, not anymore. What about you? I imagine you’re never nervous.” Her tone of voice was one of envy, however softly spoken.

“Sure I am, I’ve just learned to conceal it better than most.”

“You don’t want to appear vulnerable?” Wendy too was a teacher, and reading students happened to be one her strengths.

“Something like that. Mrs. Weir, I live my life under intense scrutiny in our world, because of Voldemort and how I got my scar. I have to be careful not to give too much insight to those who might want to take me down a peg, or perhaps attempt to harm me.”

“Will Sophie need to adopt that kind of persona?”

“The war will be over this summer, one way or the other, I can guarantee you that. Besides, wives of American Quidditch players only get a little publicity, or so I’m told.”

“Will you be coming to visit this summer at all? You’re welcome anytime you know.”

“Thank you, and I’m sure we will. We’ll be living in Virginia and working in Britain, if that makes any sense. Give us a week to sort out our routines and we’ll give you a call.”

“You’re going to have a phone there?”

“Oh my yes, at least three lines in each house, and cell phones for all of us. I’m going to go nuts with it.” He looked so happy that Wendy was now totally relaxed, he must have forgiven her.

He hadn’t.

He did move on though, and found Ron.

“Well?”

The BQL draft had been that morning, a quick and quiet affair done in complete privacy within the Department of Magical Games and Sports offices. Draftees were immediately informed via owl, or in Ron’s case, by his father, who was standing outside the room because The Burrow was extremely difficult to access via owl post.

Ron had been smiling the whole visit so far, but this was the first chance that Harry had gotten to speak with him semi-alone, Hermione not leaving his side except for nature calls, and Ron had not wanted to make an announcement in front of a lot of people that he did not know very well.

“I was taken with the 14th pick.”

He said no more, wanting Harry to figure it out, and quickly he did too.

“ Hang on, the Cannons were the worst team in a 13 team BQL.....holy shite, you're a Cannon!”

Ron's smile was even bigger now, and Hermione looked pleased as well. At least as pleased as she could be now that Quidditch was going to be Ron's full-time gig, and full time conversation piece. This was Ron's dream come true, he would later be told that the letter he had written the Cannons ' management had indeed played a role in the decision to draft him.

“Isn't it great? They sent along my contract with Dad, a year guaranteed with a two year team option. It's standard for all second round picks, and at 22,000 Galleons for the season.” That was more than any Hogwarts teacher made, and with the exchange rate, would be beaten in the AQA draft only by Harry's special deal contract, which he had signed last night.

“It is mate, I'm really happy for you.” He surprised Ron by pulling him into a half hug, half handshake, which is what Marty had told him that muggle guys did nowadays.

“Thanks, and congrats to you too, going to New York.”

“In name only, we'll still be living at.....well whatever we names the two houses, that's still up for debate. You two going to be ready to move in Monday?” In retrospect NYU should have been on the university list, there was a magical Alley in New York City, but none of them had been eager to pimp the idea, so it had died quietly in the first meeting.

“Our stuff's already packed, right Ron?”

“Um, well.....I have a plan to pack it, some it's in my trunk already.”

Harry felt compelled to defend Ron at this moment.

“Well that's better than usual actually.”

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but then closed it.

“You’re right. And because you’re right, you can help him pack tomorrow, can’t you?” Said with the hint of a well laid trap in the back of her voice. A trap that Harry casually exploded with his reply.

“I’m not setting foot in that room Hermione, and I’m not allowed to anyway, being a member of the general public.” Harry had refused to go back into his old dorm room back in September and March as well, but Hermione was still a bit hesitant to press him on it.

“So where did Draco go?”

“The Cannons didn’t take him, much to everyone’s surprise, they traded the pick to the Tornados for Owen Hart, and the Tornados took him. So he still went number one, even if we won’t be teammates.” Ron actually sounded a little disappointed about that, despite his vow 16 months ago that he would never become friends with Draco Malfoy. Owen Hart had been last year’s number one pick, and he and Tornados manager Sven Erikson had gotten along like a snake and a mongoose, necessitating a trade despite the team winning the Championship and Hart claiming Newcomer of the Year honors. This was the second year in a row the Tornados had traded for the number one pick, and it had paid off again.

They chatted about the house set up for a time, there was to be a meeting after the Hogwarts ceremony to decide who was to live in which house. Ron and Hermione would be the only ones living in Charlottesville who did not have employment right away. Ron had gotten a small signing bonus from his beloved Cannons, and would live on that until the paychecks started coming in mid-August. Hermione thought that she might poke around UVA and get a job on campus, though her parents would continue to send her money, and her grandparents as well had set aside university funds for her. In particular she was looking forward to time on the internet, which she had long wanted to try, but hadn’t as of yet. Harry had told her that he had already set aside funds for the electronics build up of the Charlottesville houses, and that he expected her to go with him to help pick out the gear.

They talked about the houses for a bit, though they were constantly stopping so that they could say hello or get to know some of the newcomers. Brunch was served too, but mostly people just grabbed some food and ate standing up. Harry wound up having a reasonably friendly five minute chat with Drew's sisters, who thankfully arrived sans husband and fiancé, respectively. Fortunately Mitchell was the fourth member of the group, and Harry knew that he would always have things to talk about with him. Heather was due to get married the following weekend, and after the sisters moved on, Mitchell reluctantly asked Harry if things were still fine on the Drew front.

"He's planning to go, I know that much."

"Glad to hear it, it looks like we're finally in calm waters with that. What about you? Have you and Sophie set a date?"

"Not yet, we were waiting for Reiko and Warrick to officially announce. We'll sit down with them next week and figure something out. I imagine we'll do it next summer, after a year of university under our belts." He looked over and saw Sophie beckoning to him, so Harry excused himself and went over to her.

"What's up?"

"Mom said that my grandparents would be here around 11:00, and it's almost then." Indeed it was 10:55 right now, and the graduates would have to get lined up in about 30 minutes or so. There were portkey runs from Flackter Alley going every 15 minutes, all the way up until 11:45.

"Would you recognize them if you saw them?"

"No I wouldn't, I don't think, I haven't seen them since I was six, and Dad was never big on pictures being brought out about his childhood. I mean I know why now of course, but still....."

"Well we'd better get your mother then.....wait, I have a better idea." He called for Dobby, and instructed him to quickly have Winky

make up a sign saying “Weir family”, like they did in airports and train stations. Sophie liked that idea, and Dobby made it to the portkey area with time to spare.

He was rewarded when a couple in their late 60’s came up to him.

“I’m Leslie Weir, this is my husband Duncan, are you here for us?”

“Yes ma’am, I am Dobby, I manage Harry Potter’s household, he is engaged to your Sophie.” He was rewarded with a smile.

“Yes, wonderful news, Wendy told us about it in a letter.” They had not spoken to their son since Sophie’s banishment, even now they found it hard to even speak of him.

“Sophie is a wonderful person, she has done much for Harry.” He looked a bit guilty after saying that, thinking that perhaps had said too much. They didn’t call him on it though, and he quickly rebounded.

“If you will follow me please, we have a tent set up on the other side of the school.” He snapped his fingers, and the sign disappeared, and led a by now curious Grandparents Weir over to the Potter tent.

By now Wendy and the brothers had joined Harry and Sophie in waiting, and Wendy recognized Duncan and Leslie as they came over with Dobby.

“It’s good to see you both again.”

Leslie had always liked Wendy, from the time she and Peter had started dating in college, and was thus more willing to forgive than her husband.

“Ah Wendy, it has been a long time. And let’s see now, the tall one is Jason, right?” Jason indeed was half a head taller than Ned, who was likewise that much taller than Sophie. Duncan just hugged his only granddaughter.

“So I hear you’re miles better at all this than we ever were.”

“I don’t know Grandpa, I’m not half bad.” She disengaged so that Ned and Jason could shake hands with him, and then introduced her grandparents to Harry.

“Nice to meet you young man, heard all about you of course from Wendy.”

“Likewise sir.”

“So you set my son straight, in a fashion.” Duncan Weir pulled no punches it seemed, and Harry would not be surprised to learn that he was an attorney as well.

Dead silence as Harry tried to figure out how to play this, Wendy and the sons were very curious as to how Harry would react.

“Things came to a head, let’s put it that way.” He was rewarded with a chuckle from Duncan.

“Well put young man, well put. Sophie, Ned, Jason, if I had thought that Obliviating my son was doable under our laws, I would have done it myself a decade ago. Please forgive an old man and his much younger wife for our stupidity.” It had been explained to the Weirs that Peter was only Obliviated because he had started stalking his family, and thus was now a threat the Magical Secrecy Covenant of The United States, a law that he was still bound to obey, squib or not.

Now Harry was the curious one, as in his mind, the Grandparents Weir could have done a lot more to help Sophie once she was banished, but had adhered to Peter’s decisions. He was just as unforgiving as Nick had joked about, but the catch was that he did not force those kind of feelings on his loved ones.

Sophie and her brothers just walked up to them and hugged them again, as Wendy walked forward as well.

“I’m going to work on Peter a little bit, get him to reach out to you. I can make him understand that Sophie, Jason and Ned still don’t have to ‘know’ about magic, that you can be convinced to keep the secret.”

The Grandparents Weir considered that for a moment, but Leslie soon shook her head.

“No thank you Wendy, but it’s nice of you to volunteer. Peter is our son, and should not need to be convinced or coerced into seeing his parents. We should have gone round him years ago to see our grandchildren, but we felt that we had to keep the secret of our world from Jason and Ned, and that his children were his responsibility. We didn’t want you two becoming like your father, and resenting your sister and us even more than you probably have.”

That didn’t answer Harry’s unasked question, but his wasn’t the important opinion here. Wendy nodded as if she understood though.

“Well there’s nothing stopping us from spending more time together at least. Come along and meet everyone else, let’s make sure Rachel gets you a nametag.” They found Anna instead, and Duncan and Leslie sat down for quick bite to eat while being introduced to the other families.

While they did this, Harry could see Rufus and Travis having a little chat, and wandered over to see what was going on there.

Flashback to one minute ago:

“I still think we should tell him Rufus, he’s going to find out eventually.”

“And I say let him have his day, there’s plenty of time to hit him with this tomorrow or the day after.”

“Are you afraid he’ll approve of what we did, or disapprove?”

“I’m not afraid of either, but I do worry that he will disapprove.”

“Disapprove of what?” Harry had now come upon them, and Rufus made a split second decision.

“Come with us Harry.” They walked about five meters outside the tent, and those who saw this, figured something was up.

They were right.

“Harry my friend, there’s something we need to tell you. It’s a bit after the fact, but better that you hear it from us rather than from innuendo.” His tone was serious, not the genial Rufus that Harry had come to know over the last year and change.

“Uh oh, who did you kill?” He was disquieted when Travis and Rufus looked at each for a moment.

“Interesting that you should come to that conclusion right away, though I’m hoping it was a lucky guess.”

“Was it Theo and his dad? Because I don’t mind at all there.” Oh no, indeed it wouldn’t have bothered Harry to do it himself, with those two and their assassination games.

“Well we did take care of the two after thoroughly questioning them, but that’s not who, though it’s related.”

Harry was now more than curious, especially since they seemed to want him to figure it out, what with these hints. Then it hit him.

“You liquidated our werewolf associates, didn’t you?” He saw the relieved looks on their faces, that they didn’t have to spell it out. Harry liked that on the whole, in the realm of people he needed or wanted to think well of him, these two were very high on the list.

“Yes we did, and I’m not proud of it. But we owed them 3,000,000 Galleons and there’s no telling how much carnage they could have created with that kind of bankroll.”

“Were you convinced that they would have?”

“You read what they did to the Notts, even we wouldn’t have done half those things to Voldemort himself if we had him, let alone an 18 year old boy and his admittedly Death Eater father. No Harry, the alliance was a bad idea from the get-go, and I should never have done it. I should have arrested them that day in your shop, but I was grasping at straws in the war and I wanted to hasten it’s conclusion.”

“Why kill them and not just arrest them?”

“Because a trial would have been public record, and I couldn’t have them talk about, under oath, what they did to the Notts and more than a few other Death Eater soldiers. They would have fingered Travis and I as their enablers, and they would have been correct. It would have brought us down, both literally and figuratively. No Harry, I had to clean up that mistake. And for full disclosure, Travis and I were the killers, we did not farm it out.” Rob and Edgar had just frozen them in place, and Harry was indeed impressed that at least the men had fixed their own mistake personally.

“Am I supposed to be mad here? Pass some kind of judgment? Because if that’s what you were fearing, I’m going to have to ease your minds a bit.”

Travis made his first foray into the conversation.

“Well I thought that was how you’d take it, but yes, we were a bit on edge about it.”

“As surreal as this scene is, The Minister of Magic and his right hand man fearing what a 17 year old kid’s reaction to their decision would be.....you’re the guys on the ground over there, you have to do what you have to do.....okay that didn’t sound right. Here’s something better: There’s a war on, and Brandon and Grant could have turned on us at the drop of a hat. I’m not saying that I would have done the same, but I’m not saying that I would not have either.”

“Harry, you’re not some kid and you very well know it. Travis and I have endeavored to treat you as our partner in this war because you have an importance that goes beyond age or experience. Once this Voldemort business is over, and I hope it will be this summer, then things will change. But the respect and friendship we feel toward you will not. Not because we think we need you so that we can remain in power, or for the next Dark Lord that will come down the proverbial pike, but because you have a lot to offer our society, and we want the society to benefit from it.”

Harry didn’t quite know what to say, he was very moved.

“Thank you, that means a lot to me.”

“I’m glad.”

“Just remember that when I introduce you to my father-in-law as a mayor of a small city, with Travis as your Chief of Police.”

Both of them started laughing, and the tension was now gone.

“Just get us a script outline before we come over. Now I would appreciate it if you would keep this to your American group only, and the twins of course.”

“Arthur doesn’t know?”

“He does, but only he and those who were in the office that day when we did it. It’s not that I trust the Americans more or less than Hermione and company, but they have no truck in our fight beyond you, while your British friends might start questioning things.”

“If you say so, but I probably won’t tell anyone beyond the twins, Sophie, and Drew.” Drew was his man on serious things, while Warrick was his best American friend when it came to fun stuff. Jonas was in the middle on both counts, and valued just as much. But of all his non-Sophie friends, Harry trusted the Drew the most.

They returned to the tent, and thankfully were not asked questions. Rufus, for his part, was having a fun time getting to know the American parents, both before and after his brief chat with Harry. He talked money with Michael Steele, swapped Auror stories with Mitchell Baylor, and spoke of election strategies with Hollie Baylor. Living in a society where, as Minister, people not named Travis were very careful about what they said around him, he treasured the chance to just be Rufus. Travis was different, a combination son and best friend figure, and in the confines of The Minister's office, their loud discussions would get very heated.

Rebecca Biller proved to be very popular with Ron and Warrick, this time not as a setup by Warrick, as they grilled her on playing professional Quidditch, something that they hadn't gotten much of a chance to do last time at Wilton's. Conversely, Reiko and Hermione had an amusing conversation with Travis about being a Quidditch spouse, wanting to see if the whoppers that Fred had laid on them were in any way true. It turned out that some of them were, including a day calendar of the BQL spouses wearing nothing but swimwear. It was due to roll out in September for the new season, and Hermione was already testing variations of:

“Not for all the Galleons in Gringotts am I putting on a bikini for you people.”

Ron wasn't too eager to advocate it either, despite the Fred bragging that he had already done his shoot. Ron comforted himself with the notion that Sophie likely wouldn't have been willing to do it either, which she would confirm for him later. Travis told Hermione that he had gone along with it, not wanting to be the lone holdout. Besides, he kept himself in great shape for a 38 year old, and wanted to show off a little.

Soon it was time to leave, as the graduates needed to get lined up, while the crowd had to head for the stands. There were no House stands this day at the Athletic Field, though the very plain name of the field would soon change. Instead it was first come, first serve seating. It took about 30 minutes to get everything in place, which meant that the ceremony started only 23 minutes behind schedule, a 1990's record for Great Lakes.

Joanne began reading off the names, in alphabetical order. The top five students, overall Olympic Champions, and athletes of the year were specially mentioned, but otherwise no emphasis. Going third:

“The Valedictorian of the Class of 1998, Reiko Aylesworth!”

The gang's section, far and away the largest, all got up and yelled:

“We love you Reiko!”

There were so many of them that they didn't need Sonorus this time, even the Hogwarts faculty got into it, and they had only met her this morning. Reiko's parents and grandparents, as it happened, were in the front row, and it took every ounce of self control that Karl possessed not to go out there and hug his daughter.

The very next name:

“Ranking number two in the class, and co-winner of the four school Olympics, Drew Baylor!” Heather and Hannah Baylor were seen applauding as loudly as anyone, much to the relief of Mitchell and Hollie Baylor, the latter of which was just four months and change away from being the sixth female President in American magical history, and the first since 1976. Drew's given name was Andrew, but one of the quirks of Great Lakes ceremonies was that the student's usual name was used, not his/her formal one.

Another cheer from the gang's side, to be repeated for the other six as well. Two names later:

“Claudia Cregg!” Claudia noticed that Lee was cheering the loudest, she did love her dreadlock wearing beau. She was the only person in the gang without a family member present, both of her parents were now serving time in Federal Prison for drug trafficking. But she knew that her real family was in the stands cheering for her. Five names after Claudia:

“Marie Ford!” Marie’s smile was almost to the bursting, if there had been a vote on Most Likeable in the Class of 1998, she would have won handily. Next up:

“Warrick Forrester!” After the cheer died off, Marty, Keisha, and Anna added their own, this time with Sonorus:

“THE BIG MAN!”

Warrick loved it, the Little Three had turned out to be the siblings he had mostly always wanted. Ozzie Coyle, just two years away from joining the Little Three at Great Lakes, had never looked more excited. Over a dozen names after Warrick:

“Quidditch Athlete of the Year, Great Lakes Olympic Champion, four school Olympics Co-Champion, and ranked number five in the class, Harry Potter!” The roar from the crowd was gargantuan as the most famous student in Great Lakes history received his diploma. He deviated from form and surprised Murray with a heartfelt hug right there on the stage, the only graduate to go beyond shaking her hand. He whispered to her:

“Thank you for everything, you saved me.” He meant that too, he would be forever grateful for Sophie, and for her taking him in when he might have had nowhere else to turn.

“It was my pleasure Harry, and my benefit.” The most unique student she had ever had, and Joanne was now grateful that she was not a crier, or her eye makeup might have been blotched a little.

Harry just stood there for a moment, drinking in the feeling of completing his magical education. It was a long road, seven long years, but he had made it. The satisfaction of it almost overwhelmed him, and Murray had to cough lightly in order to get him moving again.

Four names later:

“Quopot Athlete of the Year, Jonas Steele!” Jonas’ former groupies, everyone of whom being totally impressed by his Ginny fidelity over

the last six months, all gave him one last huzzah. Ginny just laughed and cheered that much louder.

And last, but certainly not least, both in the gang and the overall list

“Ranked number three in the class, Sophie Weir!” Mother Weir was now crying so much that she couldn’t join the cheering, while Ned and Jason were now officially hoarse.

Next was Reiko’s speech, and it was full of the sly humor that she had long been known for. She had led the Class of 1998 standings wire to wire, from the initial grade reports in 1991 all the way up to now. She had been mentally musing on this speech for years, and had been officially told that she had beaten out Drew just two weeks before:

“Ladies and gentleman, we are gathered here today to witness the joining.....oh sorry, wrong occasion.” The crowd got a nice laugh as she continued, all but winking at them.

“I digress, now where was I? Oh yes, we’re done here people! It was a long, long, very long seven years in school I don’t mind telling you. Chock full of tests, lectures, goofing off, throw in some Quidditch, Quodpot, and a Lycan invasion for good measure. We learned a lot, and what’s more, we had the opportunity to learn. Oh by the way, it was free too. In a lot of ways we’re the luckiest teenagers in the country, along with our brethren at Pathfinder, Salem, and my parents’ own Tecumseh. As the father of one of my best friends is fond of saying: We won the lottery. And to quote another oft-told saying: With great power comes great responsibility.”

“And I don’t just mean the responsibility of keeping the secret of our world, that goes without saying. I mean the responsibility of using our power for good. Now I know that that sounds like I read it out of a comic book, and maybe I did. But it doesn’t make it any less true does it? All of have to live up to that responsibility, not only for our society, but for ourselves. Yes, we can be rich, hopefully, and powerful, if necessary, while we do it. But we still have to do it.”

“It has been a long seven years, 10 months of school out of 12 in each of them, longer than our muggle friends went. But it’s different at a boarding school isn’t it? No squabbling parents, not mine of course, no chores to speak of besides keeping our share of the room clean. The best food we could possibly hope for, provided by our best-in-show house elf staff. It was a 24/7 environment. It was great though, we got to watch each other grow up. Friendships were born, romance blossomed at times, rivalries developed. But they were friendly rivalries weren’t they? I think we all saw the other kind when our famous transfer student came around two years ago, and told us some stories. Which was great by the way, I know I appreciated Great Lakes that much more afterward.”

“And that is what I’m feeling now more than anything toward my now alma mater: Appreciation. So thank you Headmistress Murray, and former Headmaster Rydell. Thank you to all of our faculty, both past and current, who did their best to get us ready for the world. Thank you to Caretaker Riley Poole, the scourge of messes, graffiti, and the Basic Combat students of Tecumseh. Thank you to Mrs. Hoffman, who is no doubt grateful that we Marauders never pulled a prank on her beloved Library. Yes, I was a Marauder, try not to faint from surprise. We weren’t exactly under the radar were we?” Murray didn’t bother to hide her chuckling, and most of the faculty was smiling as well.

“And now, here we are, about to be unleashed on the colleges and universities of America, Go Cavaliers. I wish all my fellow classmates nothing but the best, as I hope for our successors here to do us proud in our absence. I’m sure we’ll see each other at least three weekends a year, and I’m already looking forward to July of 2008 for our 10 year reunion. Thank you all, and good luck.”

She stepped from the podium to the thunderous cheers of everyone in the stadium. It was not as poignant as Jennifer Keller’s speech the year before, but it was just as relevant. The Class of 1998 all got into a huddle, and as one, threw their hats into the air, just like their muggle counterparts did. Reiko’s was picked up by a house elf, not Dobby, as it would go on display with the caps from the other Valedictorians of Great Lakes past.

After the ceremony, the Weirs got their tour of the school, which they were disappointed to see was more like a condensed version of a regular boarding school. The Grandparents Weir, who had both gone to Pathfinder back in the day, spent most of their time in the Cortez Lounge soaking everything in, and looking at the Trophy Corner. Said Corner was an innovative touch that Maloney and Westin had designed earlier in the term, and had put into place with all four of the Houses. The Corner at first glance was very small, only a meter square, filled with miniature plaques, trophies, and award certificates. Once you touched it though, it became something like a pensieve, and drew you into the 'room' and show everything in full. In it they saw Olympic Champions from Cortez, ranging from 1928 winner Roberto Mendoza, yes the Muggle Studies man, all the way up to Harry. Sophie was mentioned more than once, as was Reiko and even Warrick, for his two Quidditch titles. They were reluctantly pulled out of it by Sophie, who had finished the tour with her mother and brothers. Duncan went off to use the bathroom, while Sophie and Leslie bonded for a minute.

“So when can we see you again?”

“Are you going to be on the Floo Network?””

“We already are, the contractors were in there last week.”

“Then we can come over there, or you can come see us, as much as you want.”

“We'll figure something out for all of us in Chicago, Dad can't have the entire city under watch, it's a big place.”

“Does all of us include your Harry?”

“Of course it does. What do you think of him?” Sophie was always curious about what people thought of Harry, even this blood relative that she had not seen in over a decade. Our boy was not in earshot, he was over at a computer playing a game with Ned and Jason. Leslie made sure of this, and answered her only granddaughter.

“He’s quite an interesting young man. He has such power, but he wears it well I think.”

“That’s what astonished the four of us at first, Jonas didn’t meet him the first month. I mean he was Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, but he was so down to earth. And funny too, that’s what I fell in love with, his sense of humor, and his self awareness.”

“I’m happy for you both, I really am. Your grandfather and I wasted so much time, adhering to Peter’s rules and edicts about his children, but we’ll make up for it, I promise.”

“I’m glad Grandma, it’ll be good to have you around. Now I had better get packed, c’mon and help us.” Dobby would have been more than happy to do it for her, but she had told him that she wanted to do it. Sophie had only packed her room twice since she moved in: after her Novice Year, and most of her stuff after last year. So this was an uncommon thing, and she wanted the personal touch. The two of them, Wendy, and what seemed like every one of Reiko’s female relatives went to pack. The guys waited a lot longer, since Harry kept all of his things in the trunk anyway, and Warrick most of his. They hung out with the men for awhile, until one by one they went back downstairs. Harry and Warrick wanted the slight time packing to themselves.

Really though, it took five minutes, and that’s only because they took their time. Rick and Terry had both taken off an hour before, after some friendly goodbyes, with no promises to meet up in later life, other than class reunions perhaps.

It was finally time to leave, and Harry grabbed the trunk and hefted it up, a somewhat comical sight that Warrick missed. He was looking around the room, his home for most of the last seven years.

“Are you okay mate?”

“No Harry, I’m not, not really. We’re leaving dude, we’re not students anymore.” Well they would be again in seven weeks or so, but Harry knew what he was talking about.

“I know just what you mean Warrick.”

“For years I couldn’t wait to move out of here, be an adult and do whatever I wanted to. Now.....part of me wishes I could stay here another year.”

“Life’s going to be different, that’s for sure. Take as much time as you need, I’ll be outside.”

“Nah, let’s go, I don’t want to start bawling in front of you or anything.”

“In front of me isn’t the issue, what if Marty saw?”

“Then there would be a death in the family, or you would have to show off your Obliviation skills.”

“My vote is for option two. C’mon.”

They left, and went over to Cortez 7Y and found Sophie and Reiko doing the same thing, being nostalgic. The only difference is that they actually were crying. The parents and grandparents had left, and it was just the two of them.

Their men took them in their arms and the crying got even louder. Harry, who had been here just the two years, was even misting up a little bit. It was a ‘moment’, and no one was in any real hurry.

They soon left the room though, and went back down to the portkey area, where Arthur and company were waiting for them for the ride back to Blighty. The Hogwarts folk had left right after the ceremony, wanting to keep on the same time schedule that they were used to. McGonagall had made a point of coming up to Harry right before the four faculty and five students left:

“Harry, thank you for the invitation today. It was a very nice gesture, and I know that I speak for the other Professors when I express my gratitude.” She left out that Hagrid had seemed a little hurt by his snub, even if he had made snubbing Harry one of his pet causes.

“I’m glad you came Professor McGonagall. I know that we spent quite awhile not getting along, but I hope that that’s over with now. It is on my part anyway, I can promise you that.” It was the first time in two years that Harry had used her title to her face, or even behind her back. That tiny gesture brought McGonagall back to Harry’s side of the fence completely, she no longer needed a guest pass.

“As can I Harry. We’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Safe trip ma’am.”

That was relatively short, as the gang would be seeing the Hogwarts people the next day, and bright and early given the time difference. The goodbyes for the American based family took a good half hour though, as plans were made for lots of visits come this summer. Summer officially started for them on Monday, also known as moving day. Group by group though, the Americans took off, and soon it was just the adult Weasleys and the gang. Arthur looked them over, all eight of them showing some signs of sadness. He marveled that even Harry, who he always thought of as so calm, looked a bit sad.

“Are you lot ready? We can take some more time if you like.”

Warrick spoke for them.

“No Arthur, let’s go, we don’t want to keep you old people up past your bedtimes.” It was approaching the 11:00 hour in Blighty as it happened, so there was some chuckling as the Weasley patriarch handed the gang a jump rope.

“You just wait Warrick, you just wait. Someday you’ll be in your 50’s and I’m going to make it a point to be there to remind you of it.”

“I didn’t know Wizards lived to be 100?”

Oh that was harsh, and Molly had to turn around to stop her husband from seeing her grin.

“We live a lot longer than that, with good luck and fortune. Now let’s get cracking.” Arthur would actually be in his early 80’s when Warrick turned 50, but he felt that pointing out that fact would only prolong the ragging.

And so they were off, and two hours later the gang was lounging around The Hollow, waiting for Dobby and Winky to bring out their graduation dinner. It was the standard pizza, with a healthy helping of Winky’s new recipe: Chicken Alfredo Pizza. It was a heart attack on a plate, thick with cheese, garlic, and grilled chicken, and even Harry and Jonas had difficulties polishing off a large one by themselves.

They forced themselves to most of the time though, it was that good. They were still on American time though, and decided to just stifle some yawns rather than go to bed, as most of them would be working on American time in the following weeks to come, all but Harry, Sophie, and Claudia.

So they chose to push on, and the last of them, Warrick Reiko, would go to bed around 4:30 am. The alarms would ring at 7:00 am so that they could get to Hogwarts by 9:00 am. The ceremony was scheduled for 11:00, but the non-Sophie Americans all wanted a chance to look around.

Sunday, June 28, 1998

Hogwarts

9:01 am GMT

The gang took the scheduled portkey into Hogsmeade, which was the arrival center for parents and dignitaries. The twins Apparated in, as did the other Weasleys, as the school’s wards now stretched to a kilometer away, the recent project of Auror Command, which didn’t have much else to do with Voldemort now lying low again. He hadn’t attacked a muggle target in over two weeks now, and the Aurors

were on something of a paranoid edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But Rufus still ordered them to expand the wards around Hogwarts, even laying booby traps inside The Forbidden Forest, ones that would only harm humans if tripped, in deference to Bane and his Centaurs.

The giant brigade, which was more a squad really, being five of them, was in full view around the building. They were on continuous patrol around the building and it's immediate grounds, and had proven to be the non-disaster that Rufus had hoped it would be. Oh they ate a lot, the Hogwarts food budget went up 10 percent just to feed five more beings, but the students seemed to adjust easily to the newcomers, and there were no 'incidents' to speak of.

The lot of them made the slow walk up to Hogwarts talking about this, and many other things. Harry passed by one of the giants in question and was sorely tempted to say something snarky about him being one of the lucky ones, but he didn't. At least he checked his own self, as he could see George revving up to make a comment, only to have his wife clamp her hand over his mouth. Harry snickered a little as he saw the big doors coming up, and Madam Hooch manning them. There were already assorted parents and affiliated guests roaming the halls, and Hooch just waved them by without saying anything. Or smiling either, but Harry just took that as part of Hooch's regular personality, not realizing that she had been a little hurt not to be invited to the Great Lakes graduation ceremony. In truth Harry almost never thought of her, she had only impacted his life with one abbreviated Quidditch lesson, and some time refereeing games.

They went up to Gryffindor first, to find that the Fat Lady had gone off visiting, so Harry sent Dobby inside to find a DOM to let them in. He found Neville and Luna first, and soon the gang was inside the Gryffindor Common Room. Warrick's response sufficed for them all.

"Man, it sure is tiny." It was about 1/5 the size of the Lounges at Great Lakes.

"Now you know why our jaws dropped so much yesterday." That was Hermione, who was coming down the staircase with Ginny and

had heard them. She was wearing her dress robes, and all four male gang members thought she had never looked so attractive. Though none of them mentioned this out loud in this kind of company.

“Yes we do, yes we do. You know Harry, every time I think you’ve exaggerated something about this place, evidence pops up to prove me wrong.”

“Hogwarts is hard to explain Warrick. Where’s Ron?”

“He’s just now finishing his packing. Are you sure you don’t want to go up there?” She had a hopeful sound to her voice, trying to be helpful.

Harry knew that he would just get this question next year at Ginny’s and Luna’s graduation, so he shrugged.

“Fine, fine, I bow to your will Hermione, c’mon folks.”

Of the gang only Jonas, besides Harry, had been in a Hogwarts dorm room. He had popped in for a one minute look around during one of his and Ginny’s dates, after she thoroughly scanned the room for any Listening Charms or other kind of surveillance. They dutifully followed him up the stairs to the Seventh Year boys’ dorm room, where thankfully Dean was not present. Ron was putting the finishing touches on his packing, using the four compartment trunk that Harry had given him in July.

“Hey guys, you made it just in time.”

“Your last look at the place Ron, you going to tear up like we did yesterday with ours?”

Ron was not quite so sentimental.

“Nah, I was here long enough. Just one more night in The Burrow, and I’ll be a free man.” He was looking more than a little giddy, there certainly weren’t going to be any tears or misty eyes from him today.

“Gang, can you tell Hermione that I looked around my old stomping grounds and had my catharsis or whatever she wants me to have up here?”

Nods all around, though to a person they all agreed with Hermione that he was right to put in an appearance. He didn't have catharsis of course, and was just as eager as Ron was to leave. They got downstairs just in time for McGonagall to wave Ron over.

“Prefects, I need you for a few moments. Graduates, you need to meet us in the Great Hall in 30 minutes, so that we can get you lined up by alphabetical order and give you final instructions.”

Hermione and Ron went to join her, as did Ginny. Sophie was nearest to Ginny:

“We'll wait here for you, then we can walk around a bit before heading to the Athletic Field.” Or Pitch as they called it at Hogwarts.

“Sounds good, be back in a few.”

Ginny was there and back in five minutes, McGonagall wanted to make sure all the students in the first six years got to the stadium in an orderly fashion, and with no trouble. Harry and company would be sitting in the Gryffindor section of course, as all three of their graduating friends were of that House.

The gang got the \$11 tour for the next hour, Ginny and Luna tagging along, including one spot that Harry had not shown Sophie last time: The Chamber of Secrets. He hissed open the secret opening, and while they didn't go down the hatch, he did describe the long chute and what he, Ron, and Gilderoy had discovered once they got there. Now one might think that this would be insensitive to Ginny, since the most traumatic time of her life, rivaled only by Percy.

But thing is, it was her idea to show it to them. She had long ago dealt with any residual guilt, she got that from the twins it seemed. The twins were not along on the tour, even though they knew Hogwarts better than anyone not named Filch. They were at the Pitch

already, helping with security, as were Arthur, Molly, and Bill. Charlie and the other Weasley wives were staking out a mass of seats in the Gryffindor section, having seen Hogwarts enough for one lifetime. Charlie had stayed at The Hollow last night, and had duly reported to Harry that while he and Rachel had gotten along just fine, he was going to have wait a couple of years for her to get, you know, older.

“I never thought you would be an age snob Charlie, and this woman no less, a holder of an important position in the family business.”

“Oh sod off.” Said with great restraint though, and tongue in cheek of course.

The tour finished up in the dungeons, where Harry, Ginny, and Luna all had very bad Snape memories of. After a particularly hideous Luna anecdote:

“You know, I got you two out of three years of that man, you should be celebrating that day every year.”

Ginny just rolled her eyes, and then made something up as a rejoinder:

“We did last year remember? I for one spent five minutes cursing Snape’s memory in very vivid detail.”

“Oh yes Harry, I danced a jig myself, though only in front of Neville.” Seeing as she was not terribly clothed at the time. Harry guessed as much, and changed the subject before Jonas could inquire for further details.

“Well then, shouldn’t we get out to the Pitch?” It was 40 minutes to the start of the ceremony, and 10 of that would be getting up to the front doors unless they went at a run.

Which they didn’t, but they made it to their seats with more than enough time to spare. The stands were full to the bursting, no temporary seating though like there had been at Great Lakes. Remus was standing by himself in the middle of the Pitch, and motioned for

the faculty and graduates to join him, the former on his left, and the latter on the right. There was no marching in, at least not this year. The Class of 1998 at Hogwarts was its smallest in over a century, the births of these kids having come at the height of the Voldemort conflict, and further weakened by Harry's transfer and the mass of Slytherin arrests.

So there were two Slytherins, seven Gryffindors, nine Hufflepuffs, and nine Ravenclaws. Lisa Turpin had held serve and would graduate at the top of the class, followed by Terry Boot and Hermione. All three would be honored, though there would be no speeches by anyone but Rufus, as Minister, and Remus, as Headmaster. Remus was about to begin introducing the faculty to the assembled crowd when it happened:

A single Filibuster Firework exploded into the air above the Pitch.

It was followed by the loudest voice that most of them had ever heard, speaking a word which still chilled them all:

“MORSMORDRE!”

The call for the Dark Mark, and it instantly appeared in the sky above the Pitch, larger than anyone had ever seen it.

The crowd was deadly silent, every adult and most of the students taking out their wands. They were now just waiting, waiting for the attack to begin. Even Travis, sitting next to Tonks, was glued to his seat.

After 30 seconds, a lone figure could be seen walking into the stadium. It was a person, if one wants to call him that, that few in the assembled had ever gotten a really good look at.

Harry was one of them. Before Sophie could stop him, he stood up from his front row seat leapt over the rail, putting a Feather Light Charm on himself to slow his fall down as he floated to the ground. There were magical microphones all over the Pitch, much as at the American magical Olympics for the Obstacle Course. It was so silent that the mic's picked up the sounds of Harry's trainers swishing

through the grass as he approached the figure. Harry stopped two meters from him, his wands were not even drawn. The figure pulled back the hood of his cloak, and nodded at our boy.

“Hello Harry.”

“Hello Tom.”

End Chapter

Author's Note: Is there any such thing as a nice cliffhanger? Personally I think that they are all mean, I do them to keep you on your toes. In screw-up news, I made Harry a Sophomore for Quidditch, when of course he was a Senior, I have no clue what I was thinking there. I am quoting the Prophecy verbatim in this chapter, and it's probably time that in this, my 75th chapter of Harry Potter fanfiction in the last 33 months, I say that JKR owns all of this, and I worship at her feet. Is that what I'm supposed to say? Well she wrote the Prophecy text that appears early on here, so let me credit her there, I'm pretty sure that it's the first multiple sentence passage I've borrowed from canon.

Sunday June 28, 1998, Continued

"Hello Harry."

"Hello Tom."

Voldemort smiled at the use of his given name, only Harry and Dumbledore had used it in years, and one of them was now dead.

"I guess I should thank you for not showing up yesterday." That elicited something resembling a smile.

"I wanted you to have your day. Besides, I knew that you would be here today." Any idiot could have predicted that though, so Harry didn't give him a lot of credit for the deduction.

"So this is it eh? Just you and me."

"I see no reason for further carnage."

"Agreed. Except for one, tiny bit of it. I'll make you a deal. I'll tell you the full contents of the Prophecy right now, before we fight, in exchange for Peter Pettigrew's dead body right next to you." It had always been in the back of Harry's mind to offer this if he and his enemy ever came face to face, Voldemort was not big on taking prisoners, so this was the only way he would find it out.

Voldemort thought about that for a long five seconds as the crowd held it's collective breath.

"You have yourself a deal Harry." He pulled out his wand, which made Harry do the same. The bad man took a second to focus as he put the wand to a spot on his right forearm.

"He's coming, obviously he can't Apparate this close."

"Fair enough, I have some time. Interesting that you would wait until after I graduated to do this."

"Not really if one thinks about it. Anyone can torture a child, it takes a master to destroy someone as powerful as you are. I was cheated out of killing Dumbledore, I won't be cheated out of this."

"So it's to be just you and me then eh? No Death Eaters, no Aurors?"

"No Harry, this is just between us. A final reckoning."

"Not very Slytherin of you really, I would have thought a stealth assault would be called for."

"Not everything in life relates to a Hogwarts House Harry." This was said in a slightly condescending way, and Harry was equal to the task.

"Your minion seems to be taking his time."

"The wards extend quite a ways out, and the rat does not fly." Well he did, as he was about to prove.

"Speaking of wards, how did you get past them?"

"I walked through them, there are no anti-Dark wards up." He looked up at the sky, and saw a figure in the distance.

“Here he is. Am I to do the dirty work myself? Or would you like to add to your kill total?”

“I think you should do it, he is your man after all.” Harry knew that he needed every bit of his magical energy if he was to win what was about to come, and couldn’t waste time killing Wormtail if the bad man was willing to do it for him.

Pettigrew arrived on his broom, he was hidden in Hogsmeade waiting for a sign anyway. He showed some surprise that Harry was still alive, he thought it would be done by now.

“Master?”

“Avada Kedavra.”

Voldemort’s reflexes weren’t half bad either, and Pettigrew had no time to react before the curse hit him, and he died, falling to the ground in a proverbial heap.

“Satisfied?”

“Not quite yet. Serundo!” His wand was pointed at Pettigrew’s silver hand, and the Slicing Charm cut it off nicely. Voldemort did nothing, but he was smiling inside. Death warrant or not, he knew that he had been one of Harry’s tutors over the years. This was a man worth killing.

“Dobby!”

The wee man popped in, not knowing that anything rank was going down. He looked at Voldemort and gulped, but otherwise said nothing more than:

“Yes Harry?”

“Please take the silver hand and present it to Amos Diggory, with my compliments.”

Anyone else but Voldemort standing next to Harry, and Dobby would have told his boss where he could stick that hand.

But here he just nodded and gingerly picked up the silver hand, and then popped away. Amos and his wife had heard all of this because of the microphones, and so were somewhat prepared for the 'gift'. They said nothing though, just watching. But Amos refused to let go of that hand for the rest of the 'ceremony', he finally had his vengeance for Cedric.

"So Harry, I have held up my end of the deal, much to your surprise."

"Yes you did. And here you are."

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have the power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hands of the other, for neither can live while the other survives." It was burned into Harry's memory, since it was the paragraph of words that had manipulated his life for almost 17 years.

Hearing the Prophecy answered a lot of questions for a lot of people in the stands, and even Voldemort was dumbstruck for a moment.

"You know that if you had only Stunned my mother, you could have killed me. I would be dead, and you would probably be ruling the world by now. All because you couldn't slake your killing thirst."

"They were my enemies Harry, they needed to die, period." No sympathy there, not a lick. But the logic of it did make a lot of people smile, if only in their minds.

"Why them and not the Longbottoms? That stupid Prophecy applies to Neville as much as it does to me, at least before you marked me." Neville was 100 meters away, and no one wanted to hear the bad man's answer more than he did, not that there wound up being much to it.

“Snape never mentioned them as a possibility, he wanted your father dead so that he could have your mother as part of the spoils.”

“Yet you didn’t do that.” He somehow kept his revulsion down, he would rather have his mother dead than be Snape’s plaything.

“I take no chances. Tell me Harry, do you believe in the Prophecy? Do you believe that you have a power I know not?”

“I expect that you’re about to find out one way or the other.” Which everyone took to be ‘no’.

“Fair enough. Now is there anything else you want to chat about before I kill you?”

“No thank you I’m fine. Are we agreeing to any rules or limits? I would certainly want no interference from anyone on either side.” Yet again bringing that up, and Tom was getting rather tired of it.

“Any interference from my side rather negates me waiting for you to graduate now doesn’t it? That said, I can speak for my people, whereas I rather doubt you do for Scrimgeour.” His people, aside from the bleeding corpse of Peter Pettigrew, were nowhere in anyone’s eyesight.

“That’s just the chance you’ll have to take isn’t it? What’s life without a little risk. They won’t interfere as long as you target me and me alone.” He hoped.

“Agreed. Shall we agree to 10 paces?”

“Sounds fair, but I won’t turn my back as I walk them off.” Both of them just smiled tightly.

“Starting now.” They each began backing away, there would be no last offer from either of them to see the ‘light’ or the ‘dark’ and switch sides.

They reached their positions, and it was now time for last words, perhaps famous ones.

“Goodbye Tom.”

“Goodbye Harry.”

Harry's own wand flashed up, the fastest he had ever drawn:

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

But Voldemort wasn't standing there, he had teleported a meter to the left. At the astonished look on Harry's face:

“You didn't really think it would be that easy, did you Harry?” Perhaps trying to goad Harry into doing something rash. Not yet though, as Harry replied ironically:

“You know for a second there, yeah, I kinda did.” Quentin Tarantino would have been so proud, as Harry was still trying to process his enemy being able to, in effect, Apparate on Hogwarts' grounds. Apparition and Teleportation were slightly different, but Harry knew that for all his studying, he couldn't match that talent.

“Shall we try again?”

“Of course, but you must be tired from your exertions.” And that was Harry's sweaty little ace in the hole, that Voldemort was a very old man who couldn't possibly have the stamina of his nearly 18 year old, very athletic, self. Tom Riddle was no idiot, and he sussed this out right away.

“If that is what you are banking your hopes on, this will be easier than I.....”

He was cut off by Harry's left hand whipping up and planting a Repulsar right in his sternum. The impact of it staggered him back, but the shot was done so quickly that it didn't have the power in it to

knock him down. He still teleported another meter to his left, missing the Stunner that Harry sent in it's wake.

Harry's reaction time was quicker than Tom had though, and another Stunner grazed him on the arm as Harry only slightly misjudged on the fly. It didn't knock him out, but spun him around right into a Harry Repulsar that nailed him right in the throat. He started coughing and then teleported another meter away, this time to the right.....directly into a Petrificus Totalus, Harry having guessed right on the pattern of movement.

But Voldemort broke through it in less than a second, getting away just as the Repulsar slammed into his shoulder. Tom then Disillusioned himself to buy some time. The lad was faster and more reactive than he remembered from the Malfoy trial, maybe that American school taught him a few tricks after all.

The crowd was just sitting there wondering why the hell Harry wasn't using anything more powerful than a Stunner, yet at the same time joining Riddle in admiring his fire-rate and reaction times. At no point during the fight would there be any cheers or boos, or anything in between.

Harry just knew that he had barely used any energy, while also giving Voldemort some moments of pause.

A blue light passed right next to his left ear, and he rolled in that direction, while Voldemort's next shot went to his right.

“INCENDIO!”

Fire poured out of Harry's wand and he did a sweep with it, catching Voldemort's robes on fire at the bottom edge. He quit the fire and decided that it was time he showed off his Black Library studying. He pointed at the ground in front of him.

“Robrado!”

The spell ripped blades of grass up from the ground and hovered them in the air.

“Eneryo!”

The blades of grass were changed into actual blades, and Harry’s wand whipped them toward where Voldemort was now Illusioned and taking aim at him, going a bit slower because he wanted the sure shot. The blades tore through Riddles abdomen and out the other end.

The first blood had been spilled.

It was nothing like a geyser, just a lot of drops really, but that was enough to galvanize the bad man into action, as he threw both of his hands forward:

“Voldardo!”

Rocks just appeared in mid-air and shot toward Harry even faster than the blades had gone the other way. He barely had time to throw up a solid shield and he could feel the rocks slamming into it with a force that backed him up a few paces. He put the shield down only to see that Voldemort was gone again. Harry was getting tired of this tactic, and tried some taunting, not his usual thing.

“Come out Tom! If I’m too fast just say so, I’ll slow down for you!”
Anything to stop the teleporting.

And then it hit him.

An Explosion Hex right to the back, harder than anything he had ever experienced, and he had had Travis and Drew fire point blank at him from a meter away during drills and tutoring.

But Harry was wearing the vest.

So the Hex did not do its intended damage, but it did have the effect of slamming him face first into the ground, breaking his nose.

Voldemort was now the one that couldn't believe it. He didn't know about the vest, and a two meter shot with the kind of force he had put into it should have turned Harry's spine into powder.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry just managed to twist away as the Killing Curse slammed into the ground where his head would have been. It did dig a hole about a foot deep, which would prove to be significant later.

But now Tom had the advantage, and he pressed it, shooting out rapid fire Dark Curses that rained down on Harry's position like hail.

Harry managed to dodge most of them, and used both his wand and Tom's old wand to conjure up multiple shields to protect himself. The shields, used in concert like that, would, in theory, deflect anything short of Cruciatus or Avada Kedavra, and could only be done with two wands that mated with the user, as these two did with Harry.

But at the cost of weakening Harry a lot more quickly than if he just dodged away. It also had the negative effect of not allowing Harry to shoot off any spells. He fervently hoped, when he had a microsecond to think, that this rope-a-dope strategy would pay off.

In the crowd, the graduates and faculty had moved to a spot underneath the stands, wanting to get out of the line of fire. In the Gryffindor section of the stands, Ginny, as usual, wanted to intervene, but this time it was Bill who prevented her.

"We can't Ginny, Harry has to settle this on his own."

"Oh please, what's more important, some stupid code, or killing Voldemort?"

"Ginny, if you go in there firing curses, Harry's just going to assume it's a Death Eater coming to help Voldemort, and he'll take you out without a second thought, just so that he can protect his rear flank. He doesn't need any distractions right now."

That was the crux of it, no pun intended, and the sole reason why Sophie hadn't charged down there yet. She remembered what Fred had said to her after the Lycan invasion, about Harry needing to focus on fighting and not having to worry about protecting a loved one. She just leaned forward, wand out just in case, and prayed. Ginny had one last salvo though.

"If you're wrong Bill, I'll never forgive you."

"If I'm wrong Ginny, we'll all be dead by the end of the day." And Bill firmly believed that.

Back to the action at hand:

Harry managed to get back to his feet, all the while either dodging or deflecting Voldemort's salvos, but he was getting weaker by the second.....well both of them were, and that was the real wild card here: Who had more endurance? Was it the 17 year old kid, who had graduated from magical school less than 20 hours earlier? Or was it the old man, who had fought just two battles in the last 17 years, at the Malfoy trial and the Riddle Manor debacle. Killing Bella's assassin or Peter Pettigrew didn't really count.

Tom walked slowly toward Harry, the magical power now making him glow a little bit as he kept up the assault. He was not using Avada Kedavra at all, saving it for the final blow. But he knew that in order to get to a final blow, he had to weaken Harry's defenses, which he now realized were considerable.

There was no more taunting, no more pithy quotes, no sounds but the occasional uttering of spells and the grunts of pain and exertion. Harry Potter and Tom Riddle would never speak again.

At least not out loud, as Voldemort, sensing an opportunity, eased off slightly on his wand attack, and started using his brain.

As in Legilimency.

He opened up a long dormant connection, and started pushing.

Harry was about two seconds away from doing something very rash when he felt the entry into his mind. This was not the Harry of Hogwarts, who was easy prey to mind tricks by Snape, Voldemort, or even Dumbledore. This was the Harry who had done at least 10 minutes of Occlumency every day for the past two years.

But all that meant was that it was not easy for Voldemort to waltz in, it did not mean that he couldn't at all. And his first trick was an oldie but goodie.

Well, good if you were Voldemort anyway. He used the deaths of James and Lily, the last solid memory he had before his 'exile' from the known world.

And Harry could hear it and see it, just like a DVD in his mind.

"Lily! Get Harry and run!"

"Avada Kedavra!"

"NO!!"

"Out of the way woman!"

"Stupefy!"

"Avada Kedavra!"

"No Prophecy will defeat me Harry Potter. Die. Avada Kedavra!"

The memory cut off of course, since we all know what happened afterward. But Voldemort hit the repeat button, and it played again, and again, and again. The intent was to drive Harry mad, or at the very least distract him. Voldemort was not a student of human nature really, barely being human himself. But he was a student of Harry Potter, and knew from Snape that Harry wanted more than anything to know about his parents. Even about their deaths.

So he kept pushing, hoping that Harry would not want to break away, that he would want to see this memory.

Harry did want to see it, he wanted explanations to the flashes he had seen for the last 16 plus years of his life. But it only proved to give him resolve, as he closed the distance, physically, between the two. He herded the memory into a corner of his mind, all the while hoping that Tom was concentrating so much on offense, that he would be a little lax with defense.

And he was, so Harry opened up another door in his mind, the one that led to his 'defeat' of Voldemort at the Malfoy trial.

Voldemort, in the rare times when he spoke of it to Bella or Wormtail, preferred to call it a strategic retreat after a tactical victory. He had the lingo down.

But it was a defeat in his mind, and now Harry reversed the flow and shoved that little episode right back into him. He began chanting in his mind.

"How do you like it Tom!? That was yet another time that I beat you!" But only the two of them could hear it, their collective lips were not moving.

The crowd was now transfixed as the spells and curses had stopped flowing. A few of them had brought omnioculars, wanting to see the expressions on their kids' faces when they got their diplomas and handshakes, and those few could see that it was now a battle of wills, as well as a battle of magic, as both Harry and Tom were now going at it on another plane.

But not for long, as Harry wrenched free and loosed:

"Abrumpere!"

The Explosion Hex landed a little off, right on Voldemort's left shoulder, and he was now weak enough that even that direct hit did not knock the bad man down.

It did make a bit of a bone/muscle mess on Tom's insides, and before teleporting away, he pointed his wand, Harry had gotten his off arm, at the wound:

"Mediculo Reparo." It was the same spell that Harry had used to fix his knee at Salem, and then he was gone again.

Meanwhile Harry was shaking his head, trying very hard to get his parents' voices out of there, while gasping for breath. He had taken a lot out of Voldemort, but at best it had been a draw.

"Abrumpere!"

Voldemort had appeared on Harry's left, the shot landed right in his side, and even though the dragon hide vest stopped any explosions, the ripple of the impact broke every rib that Harry had on that side and he hit the deck again, but again had the presence of mind to twist away, as a Killing Curse just hit the edge of his jeans. Harry had no idea what a glancing blow of Avada Kedavra would do, and did dare find out the hard way.

"Dradalo!"

"Pushuala!"

Dradalo transformed the air in front of him into a toxic fume, and the following spell was his most powerful wind spell. Harry had officially crossed the line into Dark Magic as Voldemort immediately started choking, wasting precious seconds of his advantage as Harry didn't follow up, instead using his energy to get to his feet.

Not a good idea as it turned out, as his ribs were just killing him. He had already sustained some bruised kidneys from the first Abrumpere, and he unsteadily pointed his wand at his ribs:

“Mediculo Reparo.” He wasn’t into as much as he could have been, but at least the ribs were now merely cracked and not broken, and he could now breathe again without wanting to commit suicide. He was still swaying on his feet a little bit, and even Bill was now regretting his stance about not interfering.

Riddle got rid of the fumes quickly enough, though he had to use a second, more powerful Charm to get rid of it. He strode toward Harry and raised both his wand, obtained from a Russian dealer, and his left hand as he prepared to finish Harry off once and for all.

“AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Harry was ready, and loosed the same:

“AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!”

There was no mating of the wands this time, so no Priori Incantatem. The curses did collide in mid-air though, and the shock force planted Harry back into the ground, while spinning Voldemort around. The Killing Curses shot straight into the air from their collision, and looked like a massive fireworks show. Head Obliviator Steven Redgrave was in the crowd, it was tradition for former Head Boys and Head Girls to attend graduation ceremonies, and he knew that he and his people would probably be busy after all of this was over, if Harry won. He figured everyone in Scotland within a 50 kilometer radius must have seen that. And as protected as Hogwarts was, that was still a load of people.

“Signum!”

It was a skin melting curse that Harry had tried in the Lycan invasion, and it hit Voldemort on the back of the head, and the crowd had the unique experience of listening to the bad man howling.

And it was not from triumph.

Just proof that no matter how powerful you are, having the skin taken off of the back of your head is still going to hurt like hell. Harry was

emboldened by the success of it, and advanced another meter as he tried it again.

“Signum!”

He went to the well too many times though, as Voldemort blocked it with a sweeping motion of his wand, while his other hand was all bloody from the back of his head.

Harry let loose a series of half powered Repulsars, to just put Voldemort on the defensive a little bit. He still wasn't shooting very powerfully, but all his shots were at least on target. Riddle was batting them away, while making his own plans for his next offensive. He was wearing down too, though he did not yet have Harry's physical injuries. He was about launch his counter-attack when Harry abruptly, and violently, shifted the tone:

“Argua Fermento!”

It was the long talked about, much speculated about, never before used spell that turned water into wine. The body is mostly made up of water, and the spell hit Voldemort dead in the stomach. He instantly felt a burning sensation in that organ and it quickly spread throughout that area of the body, turning much of it into wine.

Though you wouldn't want to drink it.

He quickly flipped an Earthquake Spell at Harry's feet, slamming him to the ground yet again, and frantically began muttering counter-curses at his body, trying to stop, if not reverse, the effects of the curse. Tom Riddle was something of a reader himself, but he had never read the particular text, by Rolf Barnes-Sturgis, that Harry had gotten the curse from.

Harry was almost down for the count, as his head had cracked right onto the ground, and the Hogwarts pitch was not laden with Cushioning Charms as it's counterparts in America were. He again used the medical repairing spell for what he thought had to be a cracked skull, and now there was little of him from the waist up that

was not in total agony, though he was hazily wondering why Voldemort would not try to cripple the legs of someone as fast as he was. But he wasn't complaining, not that he had the energy to do it anyway.

Meanwhile the bad man finally managed to stop the spread of the Wine Curse, but his stomach was now pretty much gone, and he would need at the very least a battery of Potions to heal it, if not a stomach transplant, a dicey procedure at best given who the patient would be. As the Mel Gibson character in Payback would say in a few months, it was not easy for a criminal in this world to get quality health care, and it was no different for magicals.

In all Harry's spell had worked on 15 percent of Voldemort's body, all in the torso area. Not bad for a curse that could not exactly be field tested ahead of time. Voldemort was weakened by a lot more than 15 percent though, double that at the very least.

But now the bad man was pissed, and he let loose a burst of pure magic at Harry that the lad just barely managed to duck. He then pointed his wand at Harry

"Legilimens!"

And in an instant he poured all of his hate and anger directly into Harry's mind, so quickly that our boy could barely react in time. He tried his best to fight off memories of Voldemort's last two dozen kills and tortures. He tried so hard to push the thoughts from his mind, but all it was doing was draining him more, and strengthening his enemy. He was nearing the end of his rope, as he whipped off:

"Wallas Opto!"

It was curse that turned disintegrated any bone that it came into contact with, instantly. It was the very definition of a Dark Curse, since there was no immediate counter to it, only a potential repair job later if the one cursed lived through the experience. It hit Voldemort a better than glancing blow on his orbital socket, and now the bad man

was half blind, as the bones supporting his left eye were no longer in place, and the force of the curse ripped loose the tendons and such that connected the eye to the brain. It could be repaired with Skele-Gro and a decent doctor, but only if Riddle won the fight.

His concentration was equal to the task though, and aside from a scream of pain, he only barely let up the mental assault on Harry, who was getting increasingly desperate.

“Rohalia!”

Harry let fly another Dark Curse, one that would instantly boil the blood within a six inch radius of impact. It hit Voldemort on his right arm and his bicep was instantly on fire. He was forced to drop his wand, as his hand involuntarily opened from the pain. Harry was ready for this:

“Accio Wand!”

It flew into his hand, and he somehow found the physical strength to snap it. Riddle didn't really need a wand, at least not totally, but every little bit helped. And everyone watching was now getting the idea of what Harry was trying to do here:

He was tearing Voldemort to pieces, bit by bit.

No one knew that better than the bad man himself, and he intensified his mental assault, or at least he tried to. But his own body pain, from his head, stomach and spleen, his arm.....well it was a wee bit distracting, and Harry did not let up in his attacks.

“Abrumpere!”

A taste of Riddle's own medicine, and Harry's accuracy was not diminishing as his own strength was steadily ebbing. He nailed Voldemort in the right hip, and this finally knocked him down, as there were now several hairline fractures in his hip.

“Crucio!”

That was Voldemort, and his accuracy was not half bad either, as he fired from his spot on the ground, catching Harry right in the chest. The chest that was protected by the vest.

Harry, somehow, had the presence of mind to act as though it was hitting him full force, even though the curse was only getting him with about 40 percent effectiveness. The mind games had mostly stopped, and Harry had never been more exhausted in his days, as the Cruciatus slowly sucked the life out of him, though he was still readying his next attack. He put everything he had into his next effort.

“Accio Right Ear!”

Voldemort, creepily enough, did not have a nose of course. Now he was down an ear as the microphones picked up it ripping off and flying into Harry, who was making no effort to catch it.

The Cruciatus was still going on though, if a little muted, as blood started leaking out of the side of the bad man's head. He had already lost a lot of blood with the boiling, and from his eye and other places, and this did not help. Now the Cruciatus was hitting Harry at about 25 percent, or roughly what Warrick could do if he was going full throttle on the curse. Voldemort stopped it though, and instead used his left hand:

“Avada Kedavra!”

In Defense class back in Fourth Year, the fake Moody had told Harry and company that the lot of them could fire the Killing Curse at him all at once and he probably wouldn't get more than a nose bleed. It all depended on power and focus, and Voldemort's power and focus were ebbing like a swift tide at present.

But his Killing Curse still slammed right into Harry's sternum.

Or what was his sternum underneath the vest. Dobby had put an extra layer in front of the heart when he had made it for Harry, and the later ones for Fred and George.

It was the only thing that saved Harry's life, as the force of the curse was dissipated just enough that Harry was still alive after being hit with it.

But just barely. He slumped to the ground, and for whatever reason Voldemort had aimed his follow up shot as if his first would have left Harry standing.

"Avada Kedavra!"

And it passed right over Harry's head, missing his hair by a half inch. A hit on the top of the head would have killed our boy once and for all. It was the last Killing Curse of the duel for either man, as neither had enough juice left to throw one.

Harry, from a sitting position.

"Accio Left Ear!" He had no energy left for Dark Curses, or so it seemed to the crowd, as another ear soon hit him on the chest. More blood poured out of Voldemort as they were both on the ground now. For his part Harry could not conceive of ever standing on his feet again as:

"Reducto!"

He would have loved to say that he was aiming for that particular spot, but he would be lying, as it hit Riddle where his nose would have been.

If he had a nose that is.

More facial bones cracked, and now the entire left side of his face was now pretty much gone. The two were only 10 feet away from each other now as Harry took as steady an aim as possible and used his new reliable.

"Repulsar!"

The steady aim was to hit Voldemort in the other eye, and it worked. It pulsed right into the visual organ and damaged it beyond immediate repair. The bad man was now blind.

Harry managed to roll himself away from his position, so that if his enemy tried a blind shot, it would not get him. He knew that just because Voldemort didn't have ears anymore, that didn't mean he was totally deaf, but he was counting on a decent amount of ringing still to be there, so as to mask Harry's own movements.

Sure enough, a bolt of something came out of Voldemort's left hand, going right through where Harry had been. Our boy gathered up some strength, and again took careful aim:

“Rohalia!”

It landed again on the left side, in the upper chest area, and only with a few seconds time and great effort could Voldemort heal himself. But not before he lost another half liter of blood, as enough boiled before it could be stopped.

While he was stopping it, Harry shot off a spread of four Pulse spells that ripped into Riddle's damaged abdomen, further shredding what was left of his organs. Harry somehow got to his feet and raised his wands, aiming one at Riddle's femoral artery, and the other at his jugular.

“Argua Fermento!”

Purple light shot out of his wands as Harry fell back to the ground. He was done, as he hoped that his last plan worked.

It did. The water into wine spells landed right where they should, and the force of the spells, combined with what they were supposed to do anyway, did the trick. The spells spread quickly throughout his body, and Voldemort no longer had the energy to stop it. He collapsed on his back as his body turned into fermented grape, and within a few seconds, he was dead.

The crowd was starting to murmur a bit, mostly in shock. Voldemort lay on the ground, not moving. Nothing came out of his body, no spirit seemed to be floating away, as it had the last time. No one had seen the end the last time, aside from Harry, and no amount of Legilemency had dug that out of him since, his thoughts at that age were so unformed that it was a miracle he ever remembered the flash of light and being taken out of their on Sirius' motorbike.

Harry managed to get to his feet one last time, and staggered over to the body, his entire body crying out for him to just lay down and die himself. He had thought that he knew what pain and exhaustion felt like, but alas no. This was a new level. He knelt by the body and carefully checked for a pulse.

There was none.

The crowd had recovered now, as Rufus waited for Harry's signal, or what he hoped would be a signal.

And he got his wish, as Harry feebly raised his right hand and made a twirling motion with his wand, using most of the energy that he had left. Rufus immediately put his own wand to his throat.

"Everyone is to stay in their seats until further notice. All Aurors and Dark Force Defense League members are to do a sweep of the grounds to make sure that there are no Death Eaters present, unless I designate you other duties. Any Death Eaters that you do come across, kill them without hesitation. The giant brigade is ordered to go back to the castle and allow only students and faculty back inside. Go now." He motioned to Remus and McGonagall, without Sonorus, and they came over.

"Make sure Harry is surrounded by Weasleys and his American friends, wands drawn, I don't want to take the chance that there might be a sleeper agent somewhere in here. As weak as he is right now, a Tickling Charm might finish him off. Do it now."

Any thoughts that Remus had, and he did have them, of Rufus finishing off Harry in private were now rendered wrong. Remus

walked over to the Gryffindor stands and frantically motioned for the gang and company to get down there. He didn't have to do this with Sophie, who had Reiko levitate her down the moment Harry made the twirling motion. McGonagall conjured up a ladder, and gang members and Weasleys began streaming down it, trying hard to look at the pure white faces of the Hogwarts leaders.

Sophie raced over to Harry, who was still on his knees trying very hard to keep from passing out. It wasn't that he was worried about looking weak, he was more worried about not waking up if he let himself go.

"Oh Harry." She didn't yell it, she just knelt behind him and wrapped her arms around his torso, getting more frightened by the second at his ragged breathing. He was so out of it that he didn't even notice her squeezing his cracked ribs.

"Just rest baby, just rest. It's over now, it's all over. You don't have to do anything else."

"I'm so tired." She had never heard his voice sound so dead, and forgot for a moment that the mic's around the Pitch were picking all of this up for the crowd's consumption.

"You can't be tired Harry, you have to play Quidditch tomorrow." That did not get the chuckle that she was hoping for, and that spiked her worry even further, since that was the kind of joke that Harry loved. He just leaned back against her, allowing himself to be held.

"I don't know if I could have gone on any longer."

"I think that was the idea Harry, you were taken to your limit, but you did it. You killed him. Your parents are avenged, just like you wanted." The others had come up by now, all of them part of his circle. They didn't seem to know what to do really, though they obeyed Rufus in that all of their wands were drawn. Travis knelt on the other side of the body, having taken the time to mute the microphones that could pick up any conversation around the immediate area. He checked the pulse as well, and found nothing, mentally marveling at

the destruction that Harry had visited upon this body, and how much Tom Riddle had been able to take before giving in. He looked at the twins.

“I suppose that it’s way too much to hope that you use muggle gasoline or lighter fluid in any of your pranks?” Fred answered.

“We have some gasoline in the shop, yeah. Why?”

“Have Dobby get some, we need to completely destroy this body here and now. No stray hairs left, no chance for anyone to do anything with the remains.”

The twins, and everyone else in hearing range, thought that this sounded like a splendid idea, and Dobby was duly summoned, and then dispatched on his errand. He brought back a pair of liter plastic containers, which Travis judged to be more than enough. First he knelt in front of Harry.

“Harry, I’m not stupid enough to ask if you’re okay, but you need to get up. Not just to get out of the way of the pyre we’re about to start here, but because you need to realize that you are alive right now. You won my friend. You went from The Boy Who Lived to The Man Who Conquered, and nobody in this Pitch is more proud of you than I am.”

“Thank you, but I just don’t have the energy to move right now.” Just saying that seemed to take most of what he had left, and his eyes were starting to close a little.

“Well that’s what magic is for. C’mon, let’s do some levitating people.” Arthur, Molly, and Fleur all waved their wands, and Harry slowly rose up from the ground. The three of them backed him away as Travis and George doused the body with the gasoline. The smell, not one that a few of them had ever smelled before, was very, very strong, and even Travis was looking like he wanted to hold his nose. He looked around for a moment, as Rufus seemed to be coming over to watch. Incendio would do the trick, but Travis chose another path.

He conjured up a matchbook, and motioned for the Weasley parents to bring Harry over.

“I believe you should be the one to do this Harry, you’ve more than earned it.”

Travis stuck a match in a way that lit up the entire pack. He gingerly handed it to Harry, who found enough strength to throw it on to the body from a few feet away. Sophie helped a bit with the arm motion, and:

The bad man’s body lit up like a roman candle, and an awestruck crowd watched it burn for the next 10 minutes, until it was nothing more than ashes.

There wasn’t much conversation going on, as most people were watching for a ghost to rise out of the body. But none did, and the relative silence was broken only by some of the Hogwarts faculty walking over. Hagrid was among them, and the twins took it upon themselves to give him a warning.

“Don’t so much as touch him Hagrid. You’ve proven that you’re no friend to him.” They were not going to take the slightest chance here, and who knows what Hagrid might be dim enough to try.

Hagrid didn’t quite know what to say, but he certainly understood two drawn Weasley wands pointed at him, so he stood in the back of the pack as the other teachers quietly walked up to Harry and thanked him for what he had done. Rufus then came over and stood with his protégé.

“Well Harry, you did it. You did it and there’s no one else that could have. That was some display.”

“Thank you sir.”

“I believe it’s well past time that you called me Rufus.”

“Thanks sir.” It was a weak joke, but an internally worried Minister would take what he could get here. He gingerly patted Harry on the shoulder, and turned to the Headmaster.

“Now Remus, I believe that we came here to honor the graduates. I think we should do so.”

None of the people surrounding Harry had thought for a moment that the ceremony would be back on, and a few of them would lightly chuckle.

But a cursory glance at Rufus’ face showed that he wasn’t kidding. Remus had no real problem with it, with one caveat.

“Shouldn’t we wait for the Aurors to come back first?” A lot of nods in the group around them, even from some Americans, but Rufus was shaking his head, not nodding it.

“They’ll report something when they have something to report, we need to do something to occupy ourselves until then.” He put his wand to his throat and addressed the crowd.

“If you all will take your seats, we will continue with what the dead man so rudely interrupted. Graduates, please re-take your places, and if the faculty will do the same, we can get underway.” He took the wand off and addressed everyone around him.

“Hermione, Ron, Neville, please go back to your places. Sophie, if you and your people would get Harry up to the stands. Do it as discreetly as possible, we don’t want people to think that he’s helpless. Helpless people are very tempting to the weak in any society, we don’t want that here.”

So everyone took their places again, and Harry was levitated up to the Gryffindor stands so that he could get back to his seat. He had recovered enough that he could sit up on his own.....but he was magically toast for the next couple of hours. That’s why Sophie on one side and Bill on the other, along with the twins behind, barely heard the next 30 minutes. They were busy looking for threats, and

Dobby and Winky were on patrol as well, not having to be asked to do this duty either.

It was a hesitant ceremony as it turned out. Remus had quite forgotten what he wanted to say, and made up something less eloquent as he went along. Lisa Turpin, as Valedictorian, had written down her speech in advance. But she was no orator, and the crowd still be in a semi-state of shock sure didn't help matters. Still, she was calm and poised, and would start her adult life at the Auror Academy the next day, joined by Terry Boot and Michael Corner, an all Ravenclaw group this year among the British inductees.

The graduates were then introduced in alphabetical order. Hermione was first of the DOM's, and she got a thunderous cheer from the Americans and Weasleys, so much so that her own parents were slightly taken aback and barely got to yell at all. It certainly wasn't tradition at Hogwarts, polite applause being the norm.

But the ones doing the cheering couldn't have cared less. A burden had been lifted from them, not as large as the one now taken off Harry's shoulders, but it was a large one all the same. Hermione was part of their extended family, and she was their outlet.

Neville followed a few names later, and Ron was next to last, only ahead of Blaise Zabini, he of the Slytherin room by himself and over half a dozen stepfathers to boot. None of the three looked excited or proud until the deafening cheer for Hermione, which was repeated for the two men as well. That seemed to pick them up a bit, and all of them smiled as they shook the hands of Remus, McGonagall, and Rufus.

After the festivities, muted though they were, were over, the gang and folk retired to The Burrow for a planned party. It was kind of a preview to the Ron/Hermione wedding, as a lot of the same people would be returning in four weeks time for that event. Harry somehow managed to stay awake the entire time, but it was a struggle. Sophie didn't leave his side but one time, for bathroom necessities, and the twins made a point of being around him as much as possible too. When Sophie went to do her business, Fred plopped down beside his partner.

“So you see Junior, you can fight without us right next to you.”

“Don’t ever let me do it again.” Along with his Snapple he was chugging down a battery of potions prescribed for him by Madam Pomfrey.

“You won’t ever have to little brother, it’s over now.”

“Yeah, besides, you don’t know how hard it was for Fred and I not to jump down there and take aim at his back.”

“I’m glad you didn’t, strange as that is to say now.”

“It’s not, and you said it best to the git himself: It had to be one on one.”

“I hope Mum and Dad are proud up there. It took a long time, but I got revenge for them.” Arthur had come up, and answered instead of his sons.

“They are Harry, but you make them proud every day, Voldemort be damned.”

“Thanks Arthur, I appreciate that.”

“Well I am biased, but it’s still the truth. Don’t you worry my boy, life is going to be a lot easier for you from now on.”

Over the next week Rufus personally led the hunt for the remaining Death Eater holdouts, after publishing an open letter in The Daily Prophet offering a conditional amnesty for those who were willing to turn themselves in. Conditional that is, upon signing an oath of allegiance and admitting to past crimes and the promise not to commit any more of them. A decent financial penalty was assessed as well, forfeiture of up to 50 percent of the vaults, in whatever country they might be in.

Surprisingly this did work on some of them, as roughly 45 of the estimated 110 remaining Death Eaters came in and did the deed. This further allowed The Ministry to piece together the full roster, and Rufus would quietly tell Travis that he wished Harry might have turned over Wormtail before letting Voldemort kill him. Travis' response that he didn't think that the bad man would have agreed to that went right over his boss' head, but Rufus would say nothing to Harry about it, or let it get out via other means. A like number of Death Eaters were hunted down and killed, a lot of them were found based on information given by the parolees. Unfortunately none made it to trial, Rufus feeling that the amnesty offer was good enough, and anyone not taking it was too die-hard to let live.

Ultimately, 102 of them were accounted for in some way, dead or pardoned, and Rufus felt that he could live with the eight who had not been, since none of them were considered to be worthwhile rallying points for future generations of Death Eaters. Only Draco Malfoy could be such a person, and he had volunteered, without being asked, to sign new oaths whenever The Minister wished it of him. He liked the idea of a peaceful life with just Quidditch and other leisurely pursuits on his plate. The pardons and amnesties were somewhat controversial, but placed so many conditions on the those affected that no one of any importance complained, at least not very loudly.

Harry would sleep 18 hours a day for the next two weeks, an almost self-induced coma, as he slowly recharged. He did not feel up to Apparating or even using portkeys, so English National Team manager John Terry was ushered over to The Hollow for a personal explanation of why Harry would have to bow out of his National Team helping. Terry took one look at how tired Harry still looked, after a week of 18 hour naps, and speculated that the lad might not play all year, let alone this month. He didn't say this out loud of course, merely telling Harry that all he had to do was shout if he needed anything.

But he would be proven wrong. New York Dragons training camp opened on August 12 and Harry was right there, having done little other than rest and attend the wedding event of the summer, that of Ron and Hermione Weasley.

Hermione Weasley, it really does not roll off the tongue very easily, but the wedding was lovely and the bride was beautiful.

The wedding was one week before the Quidditch World Cup final game between Bulgaria and China, the former having eliminated The United States, Wales, and England along the way. Viktor Krum would get to hold the World Cup high this time, celebrating a 190-140 victory, his Chasers now just good enough to buy him time to get the Snitch. Harry listened on the WWN from The Hollow, though he would have gone down to Brazil and watched in person if England and Angelina had won their semi-final over Krum and Associates.

Over the next 12 months, things would come to a new kind of normal. A normal world without Voldemort or the specter of him hanging over everything.

Harry took his two classes per semester, English and Biology in the first, American History and Basic Algebra in the second, in no great hurry to get his degree, and had a fun time mixing his studies with his job with his personal life. He remained a Dark Force Defense League member, but with Rufus' tacit permission, only attended the meetings that were held at Hogwarts, the AQA playing on Sundays for the most part. The Charlottesville Houses were nicknamed Calvin, and Hobbes, respectively, with Harry and Sophie living in Hobbes. The floo and tunnel systems ensured that everyone was in and out of each house on a regular basis, though Calvin House was reserved for muggle guests, Hobbes House having most of the magical toys and accoutrements. Rachel Kessler was persuaded to make UVA her choice for college, and was scheduled to move into the spare bedroom come Fall, joining newcomers Ginny, who would be going to school part-time, and Luna, who would just be commuting to and from The Quibbler.

The New York Dragons would win the 1998-99 AQA regular season and playoffs, and win the Pan American Cup as well, a kind of Super League featuring teams from North and Central America. Harry was named the AQA Rookie of the Year and MVP as he caught 12 Snitches and scored 67 goals, splitting his time between Seeker and Chaser as the match-ups dictated. He found that there were no ill effects from his Voldemort battle, other than everyone wanting to talk

about it. Warrick started the year as the fourth Beater on the team, but won a starting job with two weeks left in the season. His reward was the team picking up the next two option years on his contract. He and Jonas aped Harry in only taking two classes per semester, and their grades reflected the time that they had to devote to their studies. Jonas too was Rookie of the Year for the National Quodpot League, though he was only able to lead New York three spots up in the standings.

The gang adjusted to UVA quite nicely, and they spoke so glowingly about it that even Ron started thinking about going back to school again, though he quickly realized again that he was ill-prepared for it. He rode the bench for the entire year with Chudley, only getting into four blowouts as the Cannons improved to seventh in the BQL. He got better and better in practice though, and like Warrick, his option years were picked up by a well satisfied Cannons management team. He relished the opportunity to focus on just one thing, and Hermione, the newest Mrs. Weasley, said that she had never seem him look happier. She even seemed to like going to the games, and it was noted favorably that she never even brought a book along to read, in spite of the fact that hubby only got into the four games. Knitting needles and yarn yes, even Winky was wearing some of her creations now.

In November Hollie Baylor would win the Presidency in a walk, throttling, not literally, her two opponents, winning 67 percent of the vote. Mitchell continued on as Head Auror in Milwaukee, content with the fact that his career was now officially stalled, but he did love his job. Reiko and Marie would work for her part-time after her victory as well, with an eye toward permanent jobs upon graduation in 2002.

Marty Coyle would set a Great Lakes record by removing eight players from three games due to Bludger injuries. That broke his own record of five from the year before. By June he was 5'10", 165 pounds, and was now considered the most dangerous teenager in the American Magical education system, even though Cortez finished just second in the Quidditch Cup standings. Rachel and the Little Three would keep the WWW ship in the water at Great Lakes, and to the relief of more than one set of parents, there were no trunk floo incidents that were either reported, or even swept under the rug.

Neville's Associate year at Salem went swimmingly. He and Beau Shupe got along very well, and the other Herbolgy teachers were very generous in their advice on teaching techniques and the like. He and Luna still saw each other most every day in some way, and spent all their weekends joined at the hip, though Luna was careful not to be seen in Salem, nor Neville in Hogwarts.

The NEWT grades came in mid-July for the Great Lakes folk, and late July for the Hogwarts alums. Not all the scores need be named, but Harry got his preferred O's in Charms and Defense, and E's in Muggle Studies, History, and Transfiguration. It wasn't as impressive as the five O's gotten by Hermione, Drew, and Reiko, or the four garnered by Sophie, but he would take it.

Ginny would become Head Girl, due in no small part to Remus hinting that he would veto all of the other candidates. He bluntly told McGonagall that this was small payback for Hermione getting jobbed out of the position the year before, and the Deputy Headmistress didn't really put up a fight about it. Only Flitwick commented, briefly, but that was largely because the other obvious candidate was a Ravenclaw roommate of Luna's. Luna, by the way, would be chosen to lead the D.A., along with Colin Creevey, as Remus' way of honoring her status as the top student in the Class of 1999. The D.A. was now nothing more than a Defense Against the Dark Arts Club, and membership declined somewhat, though all who stayed enjoyed the lessons and tactics put forth by Luna and Colin.

Saturday, July 31, 1999

Midwest Methodist Church, Chicago, Illinois

10:00 am

The ceremony was just an hour away, but Harry was already pacing up a storm. The church was filling up with people already, most of whom were Peter Weir's circle, most of whom had barely known that Peter had a daughter. The Weasleys and company were all very friendly to the Americans, and to a person they stuck to the scripts

that Harry and Sophie had written out for them. Even Luna's father held it together long enough to get through everything.

The twins were waiting with him, the other men were acting as greeters and ushers.

"Would you stop pacing Junior? It's giving me a headache." Fred echoed those comments.

"Yeah, they might have to charge you for a new rug if you're not careful."

"Aren't you two both hilarious. At least last night is over."

Flashback to the night before.

It was the rehearsal dinner, held at one of Chicago's finest restaurants, which happened to have as a partner one Michael Steele, who ate out every night and was a connoisseur of fine dining. The guest list were various Weirs, Fontenots, who were Wendy's family, and the Harry/Sophie extended circle. The Brits came in that afternoon en masse, except for the ones already living in the U.S., and Harry had a quick briefing with them.

"I would like you all to meet Duncan and Leslie Weir, who will also be known as Neville's aunt and uncle, due to the miracle of Polyjuice. They're Peter's parents and since he wouldn't invite them, we did. Thank you to Mrs. Longbottom and Algie for the hairs." Both Longbottoms smiled, they had liked the deviousness of it.

The dinner was crowded and conversationally noisy, and to Harry's mounting horror, every male Brit made a point of going up to Peter and having a one or two minute chat with him. If they made mention of magic, there was no indication of it, but it did seem like a planned thing. Finally he went over to Bill for an explanation.

"What the bloody heck are you people playing at? Do you know what I had to go through to get him Obliviated! I had to threaten to kill the father of the girl I love!"

“Easy there brother, we’re just trying to make a point is all.”

“A point to who? A guy who is not supposed to know who you people really are? Who his daughter is?”

“We’re making the point for Sophie, not him. She’s family now, and we want her to know that you’re not the only unforgiving type around here.”

“By chatting with him like there’s nothing wrong?”

“By making sure that she knows that we’re looking out for her, that she’s our sister now.”

Indeed Sophie had noticed, and fully approved. Now more than ever she wanted to whip out her wand, which was back at the hotel in any case, and show her father that she was the one who fate had proved to be worthy of having magical powers, not him. Harry knew that better than anyone, and let Bill know it.

“Just don’t goad her into doing something rash. She can do Wandless Magic as well as anyone in the room, and I wouldn’t put it past her to try something with him.”

“You worry too much Harry.”

“Thank God that’s all I have to worry about lately, the mind games being performed by my demented family.” This last salvo, and it was the last one, brought out the smiles, and Bill just patted Harry on the back and went to rescue Fleur from Ned and Jason, who were fully in thrall to her Veela powers.

The dinner, on the whole, went very smoothly, as Rufus, Travis, and Arthur in particular were familiar enough with muggle life in America to get by. Fred and George managed to convince the muggles that they were the owners of a small but successful toy company. The lot of them talked about jet lag and beat a hasty retreat after dinner, but

that was understandable and caused no comments. Indeed Peter told Harry that he liked the lad's family, but was curious about something.

“Now let me understand something though: none of them are your blood relatives, right?”

“Well if you go back to Adam and Eve we're all blood related sir, but no, what I call my 'family' is not what someone here would.....well I doubt you would use the term in the same way. I have two blood relatives that I know about, and we're not in touch.” He immediately regretted saying that, and hoped that the investigative part of Peter's legal mind wouldn't want to do a background check.

“But you call the Weasley siblings your brothers and sister.”

“Well they are, in every way that counts. Except for the red hair, I would look terrible with it.”

“And how did you come to know this Rufus person?”

“He spoke at my school when I was younger, I hung back to ask him some questions and we kept in touch. He's been a great mentor to me over the years.”

All of this was part of the script, and it was more or less written like that. It had been the spring break projects for the gang, as they turned down invitations to go to Florida or Texas, and hunkered down to figure out cover stories for all of the British people coming over. They didn't need to go muggle beaches when they had Isla de Marauder at their service 24/7/365.25

Back to present day:

Harry didn't stop his pacing though, and the twins just had to get used to it. He wasn't in the least worried about Sophie backing out, so much so that he didn't even have Winky keeping an eye on her. It was as he had told Bill: now he could worry about more mundane things that a bad villain trying to kill him. Finally Drew came in to get them.

“Time to go boys, the organist is warming up.”

They hustled after him and took their positions. Drew, Jonas, and Warrick had played an hour long game of poker to decide who got the third slot in the wedding party, and Drew had drawn a nasty straight flush in the end to torpedo Jonas’ and Warrick’s chances. Marie, Claudia, and Reiko were standing up with Sophie, and they were already in their positions, and ready to go when the organ started, and the ceremony began.

Peter walked his daughter down the aisle. She was wearing the traditional white wedding dress, with a semi-long train. Her hair was pinned up as brides’ hair often is, and she didn’t dare start trying to figure out heels now, on the most important walk of her life so far.

Well that walk on Harry’s first day at Great Lakes proved to be pretty important didn’t it? Call it a tie.

Harry was doing so many mind exercises that he was at a Zen-like calm right now, Phi Jackson-esque even. She was not wearing a veil, and he could see her grinning at him as she got to the alter.

The minister, from the church that Peter and Wendy had attended during their 18 months in the city, gave out the usual spiel about marriage being a sacred thing and so on and so forth.

“Harry James Potter, do you take Sophie Natalie Weir to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” No theatrics there, not in front of this crowd.

“Sophie Natalie Weir, do you take Harry James Potter to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold , in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live.”

“Yes I do.”

“The rings please.”

Fred and George had insisted that whomever won the poker game hold the ring, since both of them couldn't hold it together, so Drew took the ring out of his pocket and handed it over. Reiko did the same for the other one, and Harry and Sophie managed the tricky maneuver of putting the rings on simultaneously.....they had practiced. Reverend Smith was impressed, and delivered the coup de grace.

“Then by the powers vested in me, by the state of Illinois, I now pronounce you, man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Harry took Sophie in his arms and kissed her, and all was well in the world.

In the ensuing years:

Warrick and Reiko Forrester would eventually settle in Boston, where Reiko was elected in 2006 to the Wizard Congress, representing the Tecumseh district. She served for 40 years there, eschewing any run for the Presidency, and took over one of the Charms posts at Salem upon her retirement from political life. Warrick would have a 14 year career in the AQA, all with New York, and was chosen for the 2002 American team that did not qualify for the World Cup, and the 2006 and 2010 teams that did, though both teams lost in the first round. After his playing career he would go to work for the Dragons, retiring after a long career in their front office. Warrick would graduate from Virginia in 2008, never taking more than two classes per semester, but always doing his best at them. They would have, like most magical families, just one child. Karl Nicholas Forrester would grow up to be a much better Quidditch player than his dad was too.

Marty Coyle graduated fifth in the Great Lakes Class of 2004, and winner of the 2004 Great Lakes and four school Olympic titles. He had a 16 year Quidditch career, all with The Chudley Cannons as it turned out, and was named Beater of the Year seven times by The Daily Prophet. He would be a part of the Quidditch breakthrough that Warrick would miss, being on the 2014 team that reached the semi-

finals of the Quidditch World Cup, only to fall to England and a certain lad that we are all very fond of. He would never marry; preferring the bachelor life of a stud Quidditch player, nor would he attend college. Marty would pass away at age 34 in a muggle airplane crash, he was asleep and did not know to Apparate away as the plane exploded.

Claudia Cregg and Lee Jordan would ultimately decide that marriage was not something that they were interested in, but despite that they remained a couple for the rest of their lives. Yes, a monogamous one. Claudia would take over as Muggle Studies Professor at Great Lakes upon graduating from UVA, while Lee would continue working for WWW. They would have no children, by design, and due to this fiscally efficient mode of living, they would retire at age 40 and 42 respectively. They would spend the rest of their lives traveling the world with nothing more than a large supply of Harry-bought floo powder and a magical tent, rarely spending more than two or three days in one particular place.

Joanne Murray would remain as Great Lakes Headmistress for another 24 years before returning to Auror Command as a part-time consultant. Her daughter Jessica, a long-time Defense teacher at Salem, would take over for her and continue the Murray reign at Great Lakes, even though Jessica's married name was Miller.

Arthur Weasley would never become Minister of Magic, much to his relief, though he did live to see his son take on the job. He stayed as Wizengamot Chief and Head of the Muggle Office for another 15 years, before quietly retiring to a life of comfort with Molly, and his puttering around with muggle things. He would live to be 140 years old, the same age as Molly.

Bill and Fleur Weasley would stay at Gringotts for the next 20 years, before Bill, anointed by Rufus Scrimgeour as his handpicked candidate, became Minister of Magic, in 2018. He would 'Rule Britannia' for 32 years, with Fleur as his Senior Undersecretary, her having taken British citizenship so that she could be in the line of succession. They would have the requisite seven children of the Weasley scion, six boys and one girl, all of whom would do the name of Weasley proud.

Charlie Weasley did not, to Harry's ever loving irritation, wind up dating Rachel Kessler, who after UVA faded from the gang's circle and was rarely heard from again.. He chose to remain with his dragons for the rest of his working life, and never married. He made frequent, trunk floo assisted, visits with his family over the years, and never truly regretted the lot in life that he had willingly chosen.

Drew Baylor and Marie Ford waited until their graduation from UVA to get married, though they lived as one for the four years they spent in school. They were married three hours after their morning graduation ceremony, only taking that long because brides do need a bit of leading up time. Jed Ford, papa of Marie, would dragoon Drew into the family business and Andrew Mitchell Baylor would eventually become CEO of Ford Allied Industries, owned by his wife. He never would go to the Auror Academy, and his only involvement in politics would be as a member of The Board of Trustees at UVA. Drew and Marie would also have just one child, and their daughter Abby would go on to be the seventh female President of the Magical United States.

Jonas Steele and Ginny Weasley would shock both sides of the family by eloping while on vacation in 2001. Ginny hated the idea of the pomp of a large Weasley wedding, and Jonas didn't need much convincing, so they floored off to Vegas and were married in one of it's famous wedding chapels. Jonas played 12 years in the NQL before retiring to a life of Steele and Family Investments, where his paychecks got even larger. He joined Ginny there, as a couple of UVA classes convinced her that she had a head for business and she got her degree in Finance, joining Steele and Family right after graduation. Jonas and Ginny would have twins, Molly and Nathaniel, and the pair would be just as much trouble as Fred and George ever were.

Neville Longbottom liked life at Salem so much that he declined to replace Sprout at Hogwarts, wanting to see things through at his first job. He would stay at Salem for 40 years teaching Herbology before being asked to fill the Headmaster spot. He would accept, and retire in that job after another 14 years. He was joined by his wife Luna Lovegood, who startled everyone by beginning an American version of The Quibbler, seeded by money from Harry and Sophie. The

Explainer, don't ask, proved to be a huge hit in North America, and Luna ran it from Neville's office in Salem, writing most of the articles herself. Their sons Xavier and Roman joined the family business as soon as they graduated from Hogwarts. Xavier taking over The Quibbler, and Roman helping his mother with The Explainer.

Fred and George would remain much as they were, life really would not change very much. They and their brides would spend the rest of their days in The Hollow, which had plenty of room for the six kids, three per couple, that they would eventually have. The twins would slowly expand WWW until Zonkos had no choice but to offer them a lucrative buyout, with a consulting clause. It had taken seven years to wear their competitors down, but the WWW Three would gain 1/3 of the new company, and Harry would be their American spokesperson, all the while managing the American school selling operations in his limited free time. The twins spent the rest of their working lives creating pranks and planned mayhem. It was a lot of fun for them. Angelina Weasley would retire from Quidditch in 2012, having set the BQL's career scoring record. Alicia Weasley would never rise higher than a reporter at The Daily Prophet, but she had no real ambition to do so. Raising three kids and putting up with George made sure of that.

Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks would break up within a year of the final battle. Remus began devoting more and more of his time to his job, and tests confirmed that his early Lycanthropy denied him the ability to father children. So he slowly drove Tonks away, and he would never marry or have another meaningful romantic relationship ever again. He would proclaim himself content though, and not have any regrets. He would stay as Hogwarts Headmaster until his death in 2043, his Lycanthropy now allowing him to hit triple digits on the age meter as most magicals were capable of.

Rufus Scrimgeour would rule magical Britain with a velvet glove for many years after the defeat of Voldemort, only retiring when he felt like it, not due to election loss or lack of confidence from the public. It was ironic in that Tonks would become his companion after her breakup with Remus, though the two would never officially marry. Rufus would have his first child at age 60, and was quite the doting

father. He passed on his mantel to Bill afterward with no regrets, and was hailed as the finest Minister in many a decade.

Travis Biller would continue to serve as the Head of the DMLE through the rest of Rufus' administration and all of Bill's as well. He had no interest in the top job and never put his name forward as a candidate. He and Rebecca would have one more child, another girl, Katrina, joining her two years older sister Maya. Katrina would go on to marry P.J. Weasley, Bill and Fleur's eldest son, while Maya Biller would carry on Rebecca's tradition with the Holyhead Harpies, playing Keeper for them and for Scotland.

Draco Malfoy played 10 years in the BQL for the Tornados before getting tired of the work and retiring to a life of leisure at Malfoy Manor. He would never marry, but a string of mistresses ensured that he was never lonely. He and Harry resumed their Quidditch rivalry at National Team practices, and only when Harry played Chaser was Draco able to be on the first team. Narcissa Malfoy was rarely seen around Diagon Alley or Knockturn Alley for the remainder of her days, but she caused no trouble.

Ron Weasley played an astonishing 23 years for the Cannons, the last five as a player-manager. He only started about half the games over the course of his career, being second string in the first few and last few years of his amazing run, but eventually he became the face of the Cannons and stayed with team as manager or scout for the rest of his working life, having never taken a college class. He would pass away before his time, at age 102. Hermione would graduate at the top of the UVA Class of 2002 and go on to get her PhD in Socioeconomics at Oxford. She would become a respected Professor there and remain on the faculty until her retirement from muggle life in her 60's. Sadly, Hermione and Ron would have no children. A childhood automobile accident had damaged her childbearing organs just enough that it was not medically safe for her to conceive. She had not known about the complications until a doctor told her when she was 22, and by then it was too late for magic to correct the problem. They would be devoted to each other though, and were everyone's favorite aunt and uncle.

Harry and Sophie Potter settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin after college, though Harry would continue to play for New York for his entire AQA career. Sophie would decide, somewhat to most of the gang's surprise, to enter the American Auror Academy upon graduation from UVA. She had gotten a high O on her Defense NEWT, and she wanted to teach Defense if an opening came up. It did at Great Lakes in 2010, and Sophie Potter would join her alma mater, replacing the retired Tom Ripley. Harry would play for 18 years in the AQA, before a final season with Ron and Marty with the Cannons. He would lead England to victory in the 2014 Quidditch World Cup as Captain and lead Chaser, England's first Cup win in over 50 years. After retirement, Harry would join his wife on the Great Lakes staff as the junior Defense teacher, all the while maintaining the Fun Scholarship Program, as well as many other charitable endeavors. Harry and Sophie would have three children, Andy, Lily, and James, but tragedy would strike them early on as Andy died in a car accident at age 11, just a week before he was start school at Salem. The four remaining Potters became closer than ever. James Potter would marry Abby Baylor and become First Husband of the magical United States, while Lily would eventually become the companion of Bill's daughter Molly.

There was never again a sighting of Voldemort.

Sunday, September 30, 2083

Hogwarts

8:40 pm GMT

The Headmaster of Hogwarts went on his nightly walk of the castle. He made a point of touching all of the floors, as well as a complete circuit of the Library on his constitutionals. He entered the still dusty old room and sighed, a bit out of breath. The Librarian noticed him, as did every student in the room of course, and came walking over.

“Professor Potter.”

“Madam Weasley.”

“You look tired Harry, you even have another grey hair.”

“Why thank you Hermione, you still look like the 11 year old you were on the day we met.” He was rewarded with her grin, and a squeeze of his elbow.

“When I barged into your compartment looking for Trevor the toad.” They shared a smile, this was some of the same banter that they had shared for the last 40 years, when Harry had taken his job only on the condition that his second oldest friend came with him.

“I can still close my eyes and see that day.”

“How is Sophie feeling?”

“She still has the flu, or that’s what she claims anyway. I’m going to ask Jessie to look in on her when I get down to the Infirmary.” Jessie Potter Longbottom was his granddaughter, and was the school’s doctor.

“She’s had the flu quite a lot lately, perhaps a muggle physician should be summoned.”

“She insists that she’s fine, and that she will be ready to teach her eager Defense students tomorrow.”

“And that’s the end of it I guess.” Said almost with a wink.

“Like you didn’t rule Ron with a rod of iron.” Ron’s death the previous year had been hard on all of them, and Hermione still kept his closet the way he had left it. It had been a long battle for Ron, a long time to die of Matrich’s Disease, which slowly eroded the body’s nervous system.

“Yes, but Ron needed that, he always did. He was rather forgotten about in that house you know, growing up.”

“Yes I know, I miss him too.” He quickly changed the subject before he started tearing up, something he was prone to doing lately when the subject of Ron came up. They talked more mundane things for a few moments, before a young First Year came over to ask Hermione a few questions. Harry took his leave and went on with his patrol.

Harry made his last sweep of the dungeons, where Professor Charles Shepherd III, Snape’s replacement’s grandson, was in charge of his old House, and keeping the Shepherd hold on the Potions’ position, now at 87 years and counting. He chatted with young Shepherd for a moment, and then went to check on Sophie. Maybe he would Stun her or something, to get a muggle doctor to take a look at her. He had threatened to do that more than once, but she always chuckled and said that even he was not that brave.

He got back to the Headmaster’s quarters and saw that she was still asleep. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her, still a vision after 84 years of marriage and an extra two as a couple before that. She looked so peaceful laying there that it took Harry a full minute to realize that she was no longer breathing. It took another minute for him to work up the courage to check her pulse, which turned out to be nonexistent. He had only been gone an hour, sometimes things are that quick, even for a slow moving 103 year old man. A single tear rolled down his face as he crawled into bed, wanting to hold her one last time.

He squeezed as tightly as he could as the tears came flowing, his body convulsing slightly with his sobs. The light of his life was leaking out with them as he closed his eyes for the last time.

Hermione would find them in the morning, all of Hogwarts and the magical world would mourn.

A brief but unspecified time later:

Harry found himself walking along a white corridor, there seemed to be no beginning and no end. And then all of the sudden, a door appeared. Seeing no other alternative, he opened it without knocking and walked through. What he saw would have probably killed him from the shock, if he hadn’t already been dead.

He saw Sophie, his beloved Sophie, sitting on a couch, talking with James and Lily. Sirius and Remus were at the bar having an argument of some kind, while Sophie's and Harry's son Andy was whipping up what smelled like chocolate milkshakes.

Sophie leapt up from her seat and ran over to hug him, she looked like she was 25 years old, and so did he for that matter.

“Well hello there lazy bones. I’ve been here ten minutes already, what took you so long?”

Harry needed a minute to collect himself, but when he did:

“What can I say, I just can’t live without you.”

The End

And I Thank You